

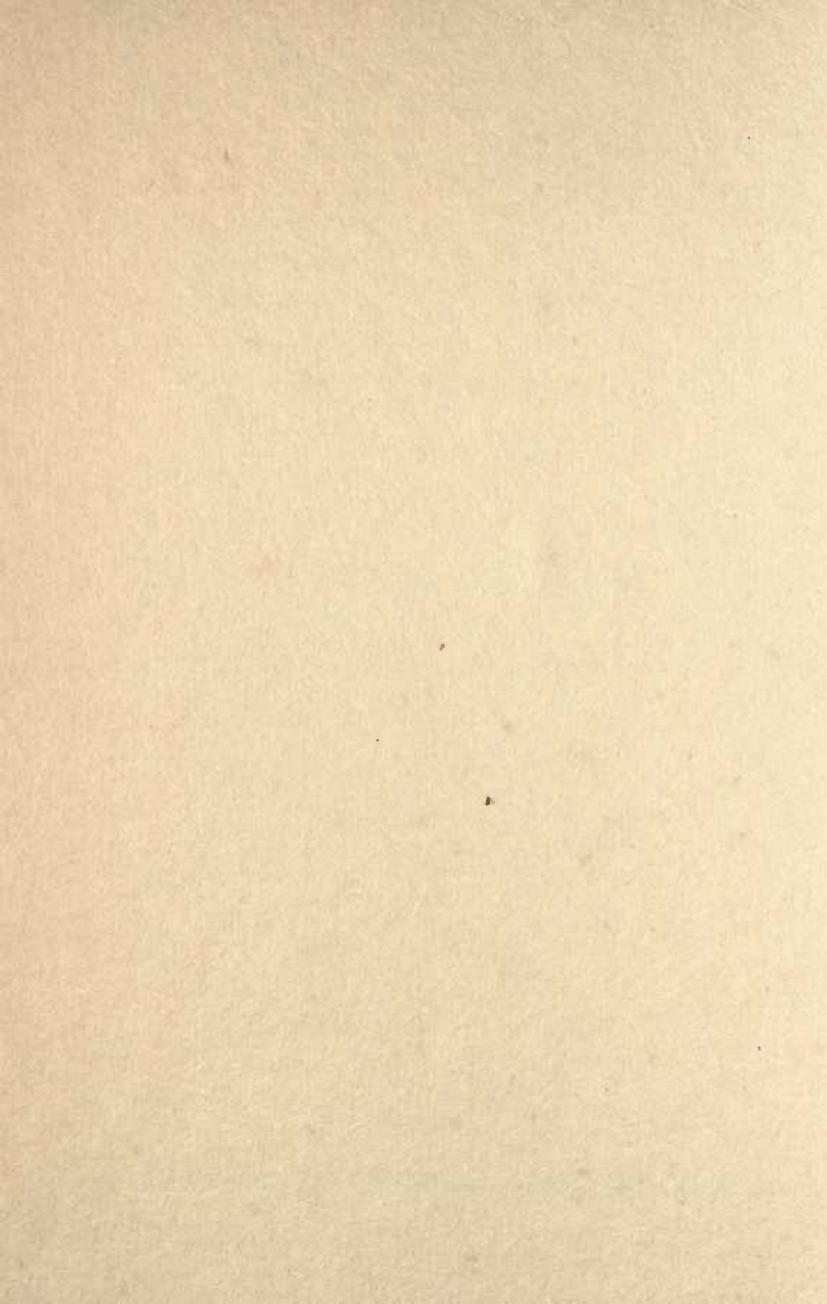
Arch. Daldridge.

35



A THING APART

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A THING APART

By

Lucy Stone Terrill



Man's love is of man's life a thing apart;
'Tis woman's whole existence.—Byron

BS.



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A PHOTOPLAY
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To my mothers—who have given to an
orphan such rich daughterhood—

F. H. N.

C. F. K.

E. E. L.

L. S. B.

L. M. H.

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A THING APART

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CHAPTER I

LOVE AND REVELATIONS

DANE ELRIDGE hurried up the garden path, bareheaded, and dressed in his tennis things—a splendid-looking young fellow, well muscled and lithe limbed. He had a haughty young face, the black eyes a trifle too cynical for the knowledge of only twenty-four years and his slightly full lips threatening to develop lines of sullenness at the corners. A peculiar paradox of resemblance gave his features the form and something of the delicacy of his mother's, but expressed through them an indefinable and striking likeness to his father.

As he strode along the path, Dane was so engrossed with the necessity of telling Judith Kingston that she was going to marry him that he formulated aloud different possible methods of approach:

“Judith, what d’ you say if we get married?”—this formula to be propounded in an offhand manner while rowing, or perhaps while taking the dog for a walk.

“On the square, Judith, I’m crazy about you; let’s get married before I go to Wyoming; come on, be a sport,”—out in the machine, driving right along, carelessly.

“Oh, Judith, I love you, *I love you!*” this version impudently upset his calmer cogitations, suggesting veranda and moonlight, reciprocal arms, Judith’s cheek against his.

Dane’s ears scorched at the thought, but—*Judith’s cheek against his*, it was a disturbing and rapturous fancy not to be put aside by any young disdain of sentiment.

Nearing the house, he caught sight of his mother over a sunny lawn, sketching. He turned quickly to another path, but she saw him.

"Oh, Dane, dear," she called in her thin animated voice, "come here a minute, won't you?"

"Oh, the devil!" he muttered, his eager boyishness dropping from him like a garment.

"Just a minute, dear."

"What d' you want, mother? I'm in a hurry."

His mother smiled up at him from under her big spectacular sun-hat. For several years now she had affected spectacular things. Dane abominated them. Her pink apron was uniquely patterned and was splotted with paint. Several truant gray hairs escaped from her careless coiffure and straggled down behind her ears. She had been "doing things" to her hair lately, but like everything else that she

did, the result fell pathetically short of success. Indicating the weird color blotches on her easel, she gazed at them intently.

"I want a *man's* opinion of it, Dane. I really feel that I've got hold of a big thing here. Do you 'get it'?" His mother's slang was always a conscious effort.

Dane gave the easel a quick contemptuous glance.

"Oh, sure. It's immense. That passionate red daub in the middle makes a hit with me. What's the name of it—'Sunshine in Hell,' or 'War at Rest'?"

Mrs. Elridge laughed—her "ready-made ripple" as Dane and his father called it, that was so falsely merry.

"Oh, Dane, *how* funny! But listen, dear: now look. I'm trying to bring the universal balance—the serenity that must eventually come out of this dreadful war—into tangible color thoughts. Can't you sense it?"

"Oh, rot, mother! You know this stuff

makes me sick. That all you want? I'm in a hurry."

"That's all, you cruel critic—o-h, you might kiss your old mother if you can spare the time," she suggested indifferently, "I like to keep realizing that you're really home again."

Dane had taken several steps away from her and he quickened his pace at her words, pretending not to have heard. His mother's yearning for affection embarrassed him, yet even in that she was insincere, the pleading in her eyes always betraying her affected carelessness. Now Judith was exactly the reverse.

With the thought of Judith the unpleasantness left his face. He thought again of his fancy about feeling her warm young cheek against his, and with the sweetness of the thought came a queer distorted idea. His mother's face under the big sun-hat, her slender, weary little face that sometimes reminded him of the

pressed flowers she was always tucking away in books, strangely became like Judith's face, and the false gaiety of her words he reheard in Judith's soft sincere voice. He turned on his heel and walked slowly back toward his mother, filled with the strangest sensation he had ever known. She was daubing the paint brush vaguely about her canvas and did not hear him until he bent over her and, tipping the floppy hat back from her face, kissed her on the corner of her mouth.

"Little old mother," he mumbled in her ear.

"Why, *Dane*, dear!" she cried out, reaching up for him, but he evaded her arms and ran up the path, calling back a kindly scoffing:

"No, mustn't interrupt 'Sunshine in Hell'; can't afford to be careless with art, you know, mother."

He felt gladly buoyant that he had done it; somehow he felt closer to Judith, and

the joy in his mother's voice rang pleasantly in his ears. As he crossed the soft lawn by the little round pergola, walled with its blossoming clematis, a woman's high-pitched argumentative voice struck all pleasure from his mind.

"—But, Ellen, don't you realize that girls fall in love even when they know the reasons why they shouldn't. Dane's a handsome thing, and I've an idea his cynical indifferent ways might just appeal to a wholesome girl like Judith. *I think you're being dreadfully careless, myself.*"

Dane had stopped, tense; his face slowly reddening. The voice that answered was Ellen Lawson's—a heavy voice, very sure of itself, and dominating, the voice of Judith's aunt and guardian.

"You wouldn't worry if you knew Judith better: she understands exactly what a wife could expect from Dane. She likes him, of course. We talked it all over a few days ago. Judith's a modern girl,

and she knows men pr-etty well, I can tell you. She'd no more think of marrying Dane than, well, than *you* would, to be exact."

Dane lifted his feet heavily and moved away; the color leaving his face as slowly as it had come, his sunburned cheek-bones sticking out of his whiteness like blotches of paint. Gradually he realized that the weakness assailing him was furious anger—one of his old childish uncontrollable furies. His whole body trembled. He heard himself muttering and shut his teeth savagely over his lip. Stumbling up the veranda steps he sat down in a wide swing. Its slight motion nauseated him. His throat felt as if it were lined with burnt paper. So intense was his rage that it smothered all attempts at coherent thought.

One hateful phrase kept reiterating through his chaotic brain: "She knows men pr-etty well, I can tell you; she knows

men pr-etty well." And he had thought her as untouched by knowledge as a wild rose, had thought her wholly unconscious of his wild consuming love for her. But she had even "talked him over" with her aunt. But *what* had they "talked over"? He wondered in a vague way if it could be the girls he had known—the ones he had known too well; but the idea died of itself for the girls he had loved carelessly did not even assume personalities in his mind.

Finally, scarcely knowing where he went, nor why, he started down toward the lake. He ran; and as he ran he swore wild boyish oaths that oiled his anger. He found Judith without being conscious that he was hunting for her. She lay face downward in the warm sand, her head pillowed in her upflung sun-browned arms, her tangled mass of bronzed hair aglow with the sun. He felt a childish impulse to *hurt* her, a sensation so gripping that he

was frightened lest he should obey it, so he cleared his throat noisily as he neared her.

Judith lifted her head slowly, raised herself by propping her elbows in the sand, and cupped her chin in her hands. Moist sand clung to her chin and to the tip of her nose, and hung in the little curls about her flushed face.

“How murderous you look, Dane,” she said, yawning. “Somebody swipe your bathing suit?”

He sneered for answer, wondering how he had ever thought he loved this yawning ordinary girl. Sitting down near her head, he hugged his updrawn knees, deciding he would humiliate her, pay her back for flirting with him, ask her what he had done to make her think he was so much interested in her that she had discussed it with her aunt.

Surprised at his expression, Judith pulled herself awkwardly into a sitting

posture. As she settled down beside him, her bathing suit slipped a little from her shoulders, revealing a band of whitest flesh below the square of tan on her chest.

He bent swiftly to her, caught her shoulders with his roughly outflung arm and pressed his lips hard against that white sweet flesh, holding his head tight to her body. He did not know how long he held her so, but presently he realized that Judith had not resented his savage embrace—and he knew that Judith loved him. The anger and passion of his mood left him so quickly that his muscles weakened and tears threatened his eyes. He straightened slowly and stared away from her. Around a near bend of the lake a sailboat drifted lazily into sight.

“Who—who’s that?” he muttered stupidly.

“Your father and Mrs. Sangster,” Judith answered with a queer, broken little laugh. Her voice broke his agony of

embarrassment and he turned to her. Her lips trembled, but her eyes shone and answered his gaze unwaveringly. Whatever old Aunt Lawson had meant, she had been wrong—Judith loved him, loved him.

“Oh, Judith,” he whispered.

“Oh, Dane,” she whispered back, and in her smile he saw the same understanding tenderness that sometimes rested in his mother’s eyes. It was a queer thing that Judith reminded him of his silly little mother, and that his mother made him think of Judith. With a little murmur that was in itself a caress, Judith leaned to him and rested her cheek gently against his. He uttered a faint exclamation. He had dreamed she would do that, but instead of the wild ecstasy he had imagined, the caress brought a clean fine emotion that was physically like the plunging of a tired body into clear cool water. He put his arm clumsily about her.

“You—you know I’ve wondered how

it would feel to have your cheek against mine. It's—it's queer."

"That isn't queer; you are queer," she corrected softly.

"Why?"

"Oh, mostly, I think, because you pretend to be so cynical and bored about everything, when really you're very dear and decent inside."

"But I'm not anything to brag about, even inside," he confided with deep and cleansing seriousness. "I don't seem to have any—oh, I guess you'd call it faith in anybody. I didn't want to—to love you; I tried to make myself believe all sorts of rot about you. I even wanted to, oh, you know—to try you out the way I've always done with the girls I've played around with. But I couldn't get up the nerve even to touch you."

He stopped, a painful red in his cheeks. Judith moved a little from him and watched the sailboat drift along in the

sunny waters until it hid from sight. She looked so serious and thoughtful that she reminded him of her Aunt Ellen and he asked abruptly:

“Say, what’s old Aunt Lawson got it in for me, for? I thought she was sort of a pal of mine.” And he told her what he had overheard. Judith listened with a frankly distressed face and her explanation was halting and clumsy.

“You—you see, I didn’t dare let Aunt Ellen get the faintest suspicion about how I really felt or I knew she’d take me flying right off to some heathenish place where you’d never think of coming. Of course I knew right away we were going to love each other!”

He stared at her, wondering. *His* love was a troublesome, awkward, unwieldly thing to express, but Judith spoke of it as easily as she would have talked about the weather. He felt annoyingly inexperienced.

"But the thing I don't get," he said with an embarrassed laugh, "is why she objects to me. I've thought myself quite a 'catch.' Spit it out, Judith; is there insanity in the family?"

Judith did not laugh.

"Oh—I don't know how to tell you, Dane. But, but she thinks that after while you'd get tired of me—of any one. I mean she thinks you'd be like your father."

"Well, what's she got against father?"

"I suppose she thinks he hasn't made your mother very happy."

Dane's laugh was short and scornful. He had never thought of his mother as unhappy.

"Well, doesn't it occur to them that you're a very different type of woman from mother?"

"How do you mean?"

"Why, every way. I mean you're not the kind of woman a man gets tired of.

You're honest and sincere and—and real. Mother's pretty nearly the reverse."

"Do you really think so, Dane?" Judith's voice had tightened curiously.

"I know it. *I* live with 'em. You don't like dad, do you?" he asked resentfully.

"Y-es," said Judith in her slow thoughtful way, "I can't help but like him, he's so clever and handsome and entertaining. But I don't really respect him. I guess I'm pretty old-fashioned," she finished lamely, "but I think it's right for a man to be as honorable about marriage as he expects his wife to be."

Dane laughed again, the careless, all-scorning laugh of youth.

"Why, sure. It isn't a question of honor. Dad'd be tickled to death if mother'd *have* a little affair and get over her deadly seriousness."

The girl's eyes widened.

"Your mother could have had lots of

affairs: Billy's Uncle Keith has loved her all his life—everybody knows it.”

“What? Keith Newland? Loved her? You're crazy.”

“I am not. But your mother would never stoop from anything less fine than friendship. And—and it's the fineness of your mother in you that makes me love you.”

Her serious, troubled young voice reached for an answering mood in Dane, and found it. He put his hand over hers as it lay between them in the sand and spoke earnestly:

“I wouldn't discuss mother with any one but you, Judith. I know she's fine about a lot of things—of course she is. You're so different from her that you can't understand what I mean. It isn't as if dad gives a darn for any of these women he plays around with; mother knows it perfectly well. But all her fool notions and affectations are enough to get

on any man's nerves. She doesn't try to please father; she tries to make him pleased with her."

Judith listened with puzzled eyes.

"I know she does seem a little affected sometimes," she admitted unwillingly, "but Aunt Ellen says she takes up all these fads because she's got to keep interested in something or lose her courage. I heard Uncle Tom say once she was the bravest woman he ever knew. And, anyhow, I wish you'd be a little sweeter and nicer to her, Dane."

He flushed and gave a twisted nervous grin.

"I—I will, Judith. You know all the time I was in France she wrote me a letter every day, corking letters, too. They didn't seem a bit like her. I used to think she must have changed or something, but when I got back she was just the same. But you know, I've felt different toward her somehow since I've been so crazy

about *you*.” He wanted to say “since I’ve loved you” but the tenderer words would not come. She smiled at him a little wistfully and he lost his self-consciousness.

“Oh, Judith, *do* you love me?”

“Of course,” said Judith simply, and offered him her sweet warm lips. Their kiss left them strangely thrilled.

“Why, good lord, Judith,” Dane choked, holding her shoulders and gazing into her wet eyes, “I—I never felt so sad in my life; what’s the matter with us?”

Judith laughed.

“I don’t know; but it’s a dreadfully nice sadness, isn’t it?”

“Well, *rather*.” The queer tension that held him suddenly gave way and he swept her into an eager embrace that brought all the wild exultation of which he had dreamed. He held her close, lost in the joy of her answering lips. Realizing the abandon of their embrace at almost the same instant, they scrambled awkwardly

to their feet, not looking at each other. Judith brushed the sand from her bathing suit and tried to pull a rubber cap over the tangled glory of her hair. Dane watched her. She was his—that beautiful clean-souled girl.

“I know I look perfectly disgraceful,” Judith said, attempting a careless self-possession.

“Why, you do not,” he contradicted with such solemnity that they both laughed aloud, boisterously.

As they stood there, exquisitely happy and glowing with youth, Dane’s father and Mrs. Sangster came suddenly into view from behind the big rocks where the boats were fastened. They were walking toward the trees that came down close to the sandy lake shore. The man was tall, but the golden head of the woman beside him was on a level with his own. Dane and Judith heard faintly a burst of her clear pretty laughter, and just as they

passed into the shadow of the trees, the man put his arm about her and kissed her.

Dane turned quickly to see if Judith had seen. She had. Her face was crimson.

"Dad is a bit careless," he tried to say in a casual way.

"I think that's dishonorable and contemptible."

Her anger bewildered him and he said flatly:

"He's — he's my dad, you know, Judith."

"Yes; and you ignore all honor in your mother, and see no dishonor in him," she spoke the words in a high unnatural voice. "I, I want you to go on and leave me. I want to stay here. Oh, it makes me *sick* of you."

He looked at her sullenly, and then walked swiftly away. The many emotions of the short afternoon had bent his brain past reasoning. He knew dimly that he

wanted to go back to Judith, but his feet carried him to the sunny lawn, where his mother sat, painting a picture of serenity.

CHAPTER II

DISTORTED VALUES

“MOTHER! why in the devil d’ you have that Sangster woman here?” he burst out savagely. “I should think you’d have a *little* pride about—about things.”

Her shoulders drew up sharply, almost touching the brim of her big hat, but she turned slowly from her painting and stared quietly up at her furious son, making a whimsical *moue* of her thin tremulous lips. Then she laughed lightly, the unmirthful laugh so peculiarly her own.

“My de-ar! why do you so suddenly disapprove of Nathalie?”

“*Nathalie*,” he mocked scathingly. “Good lord, you make me sick; can’t you

at least have enough—enough dignity to call her Mrs. Sangster?”

“Your father calls her Nathalie.”

“What if he does? You don’t need to.”

“What’s happened, Dane?” she asked in a still pinched voice, putting her brush carefully in place.

He flung himself down on the grass and scowled up at her; the big floppy hat and her straying strands of hair added themselves maddeningly to his irritation.

“Oh, *nothing*, nothing at all: except it’s a little disgusting to run across dad kissing her, every corner you turn.”

Her breath escaped sharply in a little shattered burst of laughter.

“Why do you complain to me, Dane?”

“Well, you asked her here, didn’t you?”

She did not answer for an instant. Then she spoke lightly as if amused at his youthful anger. “Your father probably kisses several hundred pretty women every year, Dane; it’s a habit with him—

as you must have known for some little time."

"I suppose you think that's the extent of the habit," he said nastily, ashamed of the words even as he spoke them.

Mrs. Elridge's expression did not change except for a still further repression of feeling, like the drying of wet clay.

"Your father would, perhaps, prefer you to discuss the matter with *him*." Picking up her brush, she turned back to the easel. Dane was conscious, through his anger, of a faint thrill of admiration; he recalled what Judith had said about her courage.

"You—you see, Judith was with me when we saw them," he blurted out boyishly. It was the nearest thing to an apology that he could discipline himself into uttering.

"Yes?" murmured his mother indifferently.

It did not occur to Dane that perhaps

her own emotions might be excluding all other thoughts just then; he only realized a deeper anger because she did not grasp all the things he had not said.

"Yes," he snapped, "that's what I said. Oh, for lord's sake, *can't* you stop disfiguring that canvas? Gr-reen sky!"

His mother stood up, smoothed down her crumpled apron and put her brush on the stool.

"It isn't sky, dear," she said patiently. "It's an expression of growth—universal growth. You don't seem to have hold of yourself very well this afternoon. Can—can I help you about something?"

"No."

She hesitated, looking down at him in uncomfortable indecision. He knew that she was afraid of him—afraid of her helplessness to combat his hard young cynicism and scorn. His arrogance had fed on the realization of that timidity since his small boyhood.

“Why, then, am I having this unusual pleasure?” she asked, weakly ironical.

“I told you why. I don’t see any reason for that woman being here. Let dad go to see her if he wants to: what’s the sense in dragging her down here with decent people? You don’t fool anybody.” There was a long pause; something in his mother’s face, not pain, but soul-deep bewilderment and a queer aloofness sickened him heartily of himself, but his mood was beyond power of control.

“Then it isn’t the—the kissing, but the *location* that you think is wrong; is that it, Dane?”

The question startled him somewhat, and brought perplexing thoughts of Judith and her troubled voice as she had put forth her young philosophies of life.

“Well, do *you* think it’s a very good taste?” he muttered lamely.

“Mrs. Sangster has been accepted for a number of years by a good many people

we know. I think the question of good taste enters into the matter quite in advance of my asking her here. But I learned long ago, Dane, that I couldn't set my standards up for other people to live by, it's—it's a very disillusioning thing to do, and you don't grow yourself, spiritually, that is, by trying to."

"Gee, mother, how you do love to say words—words—words."

"Oh, Dane, how difficult you are going to make your life by your intolerance, how very miserable. I only wish I knew some way to help you." This was always her last weapon with him—her last effort to keep the dignity of her motherhood aloof from the touch of his disrespect.

"Oh, yes, same old stuff—my own worst enemy," he scoffed.

She stood there above him, wavering, when suddenly enlightenment dawned in her eyes, as if something had come to her to interpret his mood.

“Was Judith so very troubled at—at seeing them?” she asked.

The simple directness of the question surprised him, so that he divulged more of his secret than he had meant to.

“Well, naturally she wasn’t crazy about it; of course she thinks I’ll be just like him.”

“What! Why should it concern Judith if you are?”

“Why do you suppose?” he muttered sullenly, painfully red.

His mother’s face, as she stared down at him, became so utterly distressed and aghast that he felt a certain baffled apprehension.

“W-ell, is it so darned incredible?” he jerked out, turning over on his face and burrowing his head into his crossed arms. The keen consciousness of his lack of manliness served but further to increase his childish unreasonable fury. “Now she’ll say something that’ll make me mad-

der than ever," he thought fiercely, but his mother's slow-coming words were not even addressed to him.

"Judith, little Judith," she murmured in a queer toneless voice. "Oh, Ellen must take her home now—*to-day*." Her voice took on a sharp definiteness; "Oh, Dane, how *could* you do such a thing: you *know* Billy and Judith love each other."

He scrambled to his feet and confronted her blusteringly; incoherent with astonishment.

"Billy *nothing*! Say what—what d' you think we are—two idiots?—two babies? You must be crazy—'take her home'? Why I'm going to marry her—d' you hear? *Marry her!* D' you get it? Why, you'd think we were—you'd think we—" He stopped. He felt suddenly ridiculous.

The timidity had left his mother's face, uncovering a light that blinded him.

"Yes," she said in a bitter controlled

voice, "I'd think you were a twelve-year-old street urchin. And you—*you* think yourself worthy to marry splendid beautiful Judith; you, who've never had an unselfish thought in your life; you, who can't control your slightest emotion. It is a bitter thing—a terrible thing to know the unworthiness of your own son, but I do, I do."

She turned abruptly and walked swiftly from him. He started to bound after her but stopped, hesitated, and stood there stupidly. He lost all anger, all thoughts of Judith or himself, in sheer astonishment. His mother's slight aproned figure hurrying toward the house, even her ridiculous hat, acquired a strange dignity. And he had an actual physical sensation of growing smaller, of shriveling up. While he stared after her, trying to achieve coherent thought out of his stupefaction, three people came into view from behind the hedge, directly intercepting his

mother on her swift way across the lawn. They were a tall man in flannels and a broader-shouldered youth in uniform—Keith Newland and his nephew, Billy. And Judith was with them.

The older man put out both hands to Mrs. Elridge; but Billy bent down, took off her hat, and kissed her. That was like Billy Newland; he could kiss anything—grandmothers, babies, anybody. Dane had always been slightly contemptuous of the placid ordinary Billy, but he saw him suddenly in a new rôle. Billy had been made a major; *he*, Dane, had remained a “shavetail,” although they were practically of an age. Efficiency must have backed up such rapid promotion, and,—“—you know Billy and Judith love each other,” numbed his brain with its reiteration. He hadn’t known it—he hadn’t dreamed of such a thing.

But there they were, together. Billy must have searched her out the second he

had arrived on the place, for Judith was still in her bathing suit, a beach coat thrown across her shoulders. Distorted values assaulted him. It seemed incredible, horrible, that Judith, whom he had held in his arms less than an hour before, was now laughing and talking with another man.

Dane's feet grew to the ground. Young Newland waved his cap at him and shouted "Hello, old chap," but Dane found no voice. He gave a limp answering wave and managed to take a few undetermined steps in their direction, but a miserable choking in his throat and a hot mist before his eyes entirely devastated his courage. He yanked his voice out of a tight throat and called:

"Hey! Got a date; see you later."

And, turning, he ran toward the lake again. His father and Nathalie Sangster were just emerging from their walk in

the maple grove and they called to him, but he ran on unanswering.

“I’m the original jackass,” he scourged himself savagely, “what in the devil makes me act like this?”

CHAPTER III

A NEW UNIVERSE

AT dinner everything was just as usual, the round table enlarged to its full capacity of guests. There were always guests at the Elridges'. The times when the family, the three of them, were alone in either of their big houses, were bleak and uncomfortable occasions.

Dane was never talkative, so that tonight his unbroken silence passed unnoticed in the laughter and chatter of the others. The facts of the afternoon dug into his mind, insisting on their reality. "I did propose to her,—I did kiss her,—I did act like a calf, a fool, a baby."

He glanced stealthily at his mother when he was sure her attention was else-

where. She sat between Keith Newland and Mr. Lawson, Judith's uncle, chatting gaily. She seemed different, somehow, among these people most of whom happened to be her friends more particularly than his father's.

Now that he thought of it, Dane remembered that she always seemed to take on an ease of manner—a sort of consequence, when Newland came down with his quiet deference toward her, and quiet admiration. Newland had been an occasional guest at their home ever since Dane could remember. Dane had never liked him especially, unconsciously damning him because of his father's light ridicule. Moreover, he played a painful game of tennis, unforgivable golf, and was short-sighted,—amusingly hesitant without his glasses. But his financial position was quite beyond ridicule, as was his extremely forceful though unobtrusive direction of certain political affairs.

Dane fell to wondering if Newland could really love his mother, as Judith had said. He wondered what they talked about when they were alone together—if Newland had ever kissed her; the thought was amusing but became quickly unpleasant because it reminded him of Judith and her rude dismissal of him that afternoon. He dropped into a sullen study of his mother. One was always conscious of the way Mrs. Elridge attempted to look, as much as of her actual appearance. Tonight, her green gown of oriental fashion, goemetrically patterned with Batik designs, screamed its betrayal of her desire to be “artistically interesting” in contrast with the radiant wholly-female Mrs. Sangster who wore a low-cut trailing mystery of delicate rose chiffon.

“Lord, no wonder dad’s gone on her,” Dane thought, turning his attention to the lovely woman with her exquisite skin and her gold hair that glistened even in the

dull light of the candles. Dane had never noticed her extraordinary allure before; he had never thought about her at all except that she was another of his father's "little affairs"—a beautiful woman and a good sport whom naturally a man might admire. But now, attuned to contrast, he noticed that Judith's face was unpleasantly sunburned, that his mother looked an utter freak, that the other women seemed extremely ordinary—it was like comparing fat little garden flowers with an orchid. As he itemized the comparison, Mrs. Sangster's cool deep eyes lifted several times and met his gaze. Once she smiled. And Dane was startled at the thrill that raced over his body. His emotions, tempest-whirled by his love for Judith, were like tingling taut wires. He did not look at Mrs. Sangster again, thinking to himself:

“Judith's jealous of her, of course; any woman'd be jealous of her.”

All through dinner, Judith did not once look at him. He was glad of it. By some magic, he seemed a little less helpless in his love for her; he was able more and more to regard her with a detached interest. He felt no resentment because of the whole-hearted flattering attention she bestowed on Billy, who talked on and on with disgusting abandon about his war experiences. Young Newland had only just returned from France and was not yet discharged; the admiration and interest of the cordial circle about him were plainly pleasing to him, and his eyes openly drank pleasure from Judith's fresh glowing face. Dane's intolerance and lack of belief returned to him. Perhaps those two did love each other, they certainly displayed every sign of so doing. And Judith, like all the rest of them, was a flirt. By the end of dinner, he felt utterly indifferent to her.

But when they went into the drawing-

room Judith stood in the doorway, and as they passed, his hand brushed against hers. He stopped. She looked straight into his eyes and his indifference dropped from him like loosened armor.

"Are you still 'sick of me,' " he muttered.

"No; I'm sorry I was horrid. I love you lots," she whispered, smiling.

He felt the blood burn into his face at her naive frankness. He gulped, feeling distressingly young.

"Why were you hating me all through dinner?" she accused him.

Such perception seemed no less than miraculous.

"How do you know I was? You never looked at me."

"Oh, yes, I did; when you were staring so hard at Mrs. Sangster."

But Dane had no reason for embarrassment, here.

"You know, Judith, I never even gave

her a thought till you got me curious this afternoon. She is a peach to look at, isn't she?"

Judith's manner cooled. It amused him, and gave him a sense of mastery, of superior age and experience. Then she laughed.

"She *is* beautiful," she admitted, "but I hate her, oh, I just detest her, don't you?"

"Why, good lord, no," he said honestly. "What's the matter with her? She's never done anything to me."

Again the same startled, doubting expression of that afternoon disturbed the candor of Judith's wide brown eyes.

"Let's not talk about her," she said hastily. "Come on; Billy promised me he'd sing some of the German parodies his men made up while they were in Coblenz."

"*Darn* Billy's songs! I want to talk to

you. Let's get out of this. Put on a scarf; it's a peach of a night."

"What do you want to talk about?" she demurred, hesitating. "Won't they think it's queer for us to run off by ourselves?"

He leaned closer to her, suddenly endowed with daring words, because he saw that even she was still half fearful of their love.

"They won't think it's as queer as if I begin kissing you right here."

Her cheeks colored but her eyes accepted his challenge, and they slipped away together into the dusky night, cooled with a breeze that carried the fragrance of heliotrope and sweet brier roses. He breathed it in deeply.

"Gosh, Judith, I feel like I've been turned loose in a new universe—another 'astral plane' that mother talks about. You know, I never even noticed what a dog-gone nice smell those brier roses have."

A little awkwardly he took her in his

arms, conscious even above the thrilling pleasure that her body gave him, of a great good difference between the white desire of his love and other passions he had known, carelessly.

"We can be married Sunday afternoon," he said breathlessly, his lips still very near to hers.

Judith broke into nervous, girlish laughter.

"*Married?* Why—why, Dane! Why, you funny old thing. Of course we can't be married for a year or two. Whatever are you thinking about?"

"For a year or two?" he repeated stupidly. His heart sickened in its beating. She did not want him as he wanted her. He felt as helpless as he had seen his mother look before some careless unintended hurt from his father.

"Why, you wouldn't *want* to marry before you've at least started out for yourself, would you?" he heard Judith saying

in a puzzled way. "Would you want me drawing on your father's bank-account for my gowns and, and the groceries, and—and everything?"

Money! Was she afraid there wasn't money?

"You needn't worry about the money part of it; there's plenty. I didn't think you'd be interested in that end of it, or I'd have explained to you sooner. Grandmother Stillman's estate came to me when I was twenty-one."

Judith shook his arm rebukingly.

"Oh, aren't you the nasty thing? You know perfectly well I'd have loved you if you'd been the ice man. But you've never even made as much money as an ice man. I'll wager I've earned more money than you have."

"No doubt; soliciting charity subscriptions."

"I earned two hundred and fifty dollars a month all during the war."

“So that’s the way you girls over here did war work—for *pay*?” He was incredulous.

“I certainly did, and I certainly earned it. I wrote propaganda articles every day for seven hours and typed them myself. I gave the money to the Red Cross again, but just the same *I earned it.*”

“I don’t quite get the drift of your argument,” he said sullenly. “I’ll admit a shavetail didn’t get two hundred and fifty a month, but I’ve an idea most of us earned it, and we didn’t exactly go in for a financial adventure.”

“Oh, Dane,” she protested in a distressed voice, “sometimes you—you actually make me want to spank you. As if I wanted you to stay at home and make money instead of enlisting. But I do want you to—to ‘make good’ before we’re married—you owe it to yourself, the satisfaction of it. Why, dear, a year or two will just fly by—”

She stopped; in the dim light his handsome young face showed the uncontrollable rage of a youngster. He grasped her shoulders and shook her.

"Yes, yes, they will! 'Fly by' out there on the desert in Wyoming—oh, yes! Why don't you *say* you don't want to go out there to live! You won't have to; I'll go by myself, I expected to. But you've got to marry me! you've got to, I tell you or I'll—I'll—"

Judith jerked away from his rough hold of her.

"Baby," she taunted, "you great big baby; *what* will you do? Shake me and pinch me and pull my hair, it seems. Why, I ought to carry a revolver to protect myself."

His anger crumpled to shame before the scorn in her eyes, and she was laughing! Again he felt overpowered with the helplessness he had so often seen in his mother's face, the helplessness of striv-

ing to exert the power of a greater love over a lesser one. He stared at Judith's derisive but unangered face for a blank instant, and then threw his arms about her and put his face down against her cool bared shoulder.

"Oh, Judith—*please*, Judith; you *must* love me, Judith; you must. If you'd only help me, Judith, I'd be different—I know I would." He went on murmuring incoherent things while she held him close to her and put her head down against his.

"Why, Dane, why, Dane, I love you," she whispered. She had been a little frightened by his flights of emotion. "I want to help you more than anything else in the world. What do you mean by you'll 'be different' if I help you?"

It was hard to explain, scarcely knowing himself.

"You know what I mean, Judith; you know how I am: I don't do the things I really want to, I can't seem to believe in

anything; you said this afternoon you knew how it was."

"Yes," whispered Judith, "oh, yes."

But he knew that she did not understand, and he fell back weakly to the thing he feared—her lesser love than his.

"You don't love me, Judith, the way I do you; and it *scares* me, oh, I can't tell you."

Judith did not answer. He had hoped she would quickly deny it; he *prayed* that she would, but she only said:

"Dane, I must be the first girl you've ever loved; am I?"

Her puzzled question filled him with helpless resentment.

"Yes."

"Oh, my dearest," she breathed softly and lifted his head and brought his lips to hers. He rebounded from hell to heaven. It was dizzying.

"Why—why, what of it?" he stammered. "What d' you mean? I've played

around with some girls, of course. Why? Are *you* so experienced?"

"I don't know that you'd call it 'experienced,' " her manner was quickly cooler. "You needn't mention the 'girls you've played around with' to me, Dane. I don't want to know anything about them—even to think of them. I just—just thought I was the first girl you've really loved because other men who've made love to me were—were different; sort of more—oh, I can't explain it."

She laughed, a little self-consciously. His mind went groping from the pleasure of her lips into tangled paths of doubt again.

"Judith, tell me; has Bill Newland—I mean, is he crazy about you?"

"We like each other," she evaded.

Little pricks of heat twinkled down his back but by a severe effort he spoke quietly.

"Tell me, Judith."

"Tell you what? Isn't it enough to know we love each other?"

"But I don't know that you love me," he objected dully. "One minute I think you do, and the next minute I'm sure you don't—not the way I do. I've got to marry you, have you, belong to you, or get out altogether, that's all there is to it."

She looked at him searchingly. Then she said hesitatingly, and very low:

"If—if I were only sure about us, about us after while I mean, I'd—why, Dane, if I felt sure your love is—is your mother's kind of love, I think I'd marry you to-morrow!"

"Truly, Judith," he said hoarsely.

"Why, yes, I *want* to marry you. What—what do you suppose?"

The comforting ecstasy of her words numbed him.

"Oh, can't you believe me, Judith? I should think you'd *feel* it, somehow.

You'll never possibly be any less. Can't you realize it?"

"I almost can," she said slowly, like a child unwillingly tempted.

"Then we shall be married to-morrow," he said instantly. "I thought that making good stuff was all camouflage. I know I'll make good, and so do you."

"Oh, but—but," she hesitated, thinking as she talked, "let me have just this week, Dane, without saying a word to any one.—I don't want Aunt Ellen to dream of such a thing; a week just to decide for myself—and then, if you don't lose your temper again and beat me, I—I will."

After this they had no need for words for a long time. But her evasion about Billy bothered him. Finally he said:

"Mother told me this afternoon that you and Billy had been in love for a long time."

"Oh, Dane, why are you so silly? I like him—I *love* you. Now listen," she

whispered softly, their lips touching, "I love you, I love you, I love you. Remember it."

He was unwillingly soothed, her lips were so heavenly sweet.

"But, sweetheart, there's no good pretending, is there? I'd just keep on thinking about the darn thing. Just tell me this: has—has he ever kissed you?" he blurted the words out in one breath.

"Yes, Dane, quite often."

"Why—why, my God, Judith; *kissed* you?"

Judith was plainly startled at the aghast bewilderment in his voice. He sat back, staring at her with miserable, uncomprehending eyes; his very body felt bruised.

"Well, Dane! you act like a movie hero; you're *funny*. Have you never kissed any one?"

"Yes. And now that I love you, I'm ashamed—sick, even to think about it."

Judith's eyes filled with tears. She put her arms around him motheringly.

"Oh, you queer, blessed, old thing! You've nothing to be jealous of Billy about. We've known each other all our lives, and he's always sort of thought he owned me, and bossed me about. While he was in France he decided he wanted to marry me, and it's going to be a little rough on him to find out about you. So—so you'll be nice about it, won't you?"

Her cheek was against his and his heart was infinitely calm.

"Poor old devil," he muttered, pitying Billy profoundly, "I'll say I'll be nice to him. Oh, Judith, it's wonderful to have some one really to talk to. And you always will tell me things, won't you—and, and help me?"

"Always," promised Judith, her eyes as solemn and undoubting as the stars. "I've really got a feeling, Dane, that we're going to be happier than most people are."

“So have I,” he said solemnly, both of them supremely unaware that this prophecy was born with Cupid when Love began.

On their way to the house she asked him what he had told his mother and what she had said. Dane tingled with discomfort, but he forced himself to tell her the whole unpleasant truth, not in the least sparing himself. He had never before in all his life confessed that he was ashamed, sorry, for anything he had done; it was amazing, the weight that the admission lifted from his shoulders.

“You wouldn’t have believed how she ripped into me, Judith,” he ended; “she surely gave me to understand that I’m not half good enough for you.”

“I’ve always loved your mother,” Judith said irrelevantly. “A long time ago when Aunt Ellen and Uncle Tom came to take care of me after father and mother died, you used to come out to Tarrytown

and stay with us sometimes. I don't remember *you* at all, but your mother used to come up to the nursery when I was ready for bed and sing me little songs. She'd make them up for me about anything I liked. And I always wanted to hear about *her* little girl—the make-believe little girl who never came true. I wonder, dear, if I didn't begin loving you then, without knowing it, so that I could come true for her some day."

Dane's throat choked. Life was opening such undreamed-of depths of sweetness to him; such great significances to such little things. And just then it presented another momentous nothingness.

Two tall figures came out from the big house, the woman looking, from across the moonlit lawn, like some fairy thing in her floating scarf and draperies. The man was bareheaded.

"Oh, damn it to hell," Dane cursed inwardly, the first rage he had ever known

against his father rising within him. Judith's hand tightened in his, but he was afraid to look at her; the sympathetic confidence, the feeling of nearness to her vanished as wholly as if it had never been.

"Oh, Judith," he blurted out, not knowing at all what he was saying, "why do you blame *me*? I can't help it, can I?—you seem to think it's my fault? What harm is there if they go for a walk?"

"Why, Dane, I didn't say anything," said Judith, wonderingly.

It was true, she hadn't. He laughed with relief.

"Well, you—you felt it."

"N-o, I didn't feel it was your fault; but it *is* wrong—that, that kind of friendship, I mean," she said, as though silencing some doubt of the matter.

"I—I think I'll have a little talk with dad, to-morrow," he said, very thoughtfully.

CHAPTER IV

FATHER AND SON

BUT by morning the "little talk" had fortified itself behind gigantic difficulties of approach. Dane saw his father at breakfast; but instead of being elated at the prospect of talking with him, alone, he was strangely disquieted. His mother and Mrs. Lawson had breakfasted, and the others had not yet come down.

"Hello, great morning for a game," his father greeted him. "Peters finished rolling the course yesterday."

"Yes," said Dane, "I don't think I'll play, though."

His father went on reading his paper, guiding baked apple and cream into his

mouth with surprising sureness of direction.

"Why, good lord, I can't say anything to him," Dane thought uncomfortably, wondering at his convictions of the night before.

Though a cordial and untroubled relationship existed between him and his father it was far from an intimate one. Dane had never thought of this before. There had never been any reason to. They had never needed each other. Not the slightest tie of sacrifice bound them together, not even a tendril of sympathetic confidence. They were simply two old acquaintances who happened to live in the same house because a certain little woman with a face like a pressed flower, had made them father and son.

Pride was the bond between them, a queer undemonstrative pride.

As a little chap, he had received the meagerest attention from his father.

Occasionally they rode together, and Dane had always been pleasurablely aware that his father was proud of him, satisfied with him. And all his life he had been, just as subtly, proud of his father—of his distinguished appearance, of his good sportsmanship, of his popularity and dry, ironical humor.

Now, as he sat at the table, trying to formulate the remarks that Judith had made him feel were necessary to make, he was acutely conscious of the gulf of restraint that separated them. His father looked just the same in his fresh linen, his perfectly cut suit, and his huge tortoise rimmed glasses a trifle aslant, as always, above his long bridged nose. But with the urge of the reproof that lay waiting in Dane's mind to be administered, he seemed different, strange, unapproachable.

Dane could no more have said to him, "Dad, I love Judith Kingston, I'm going

to marry her," than he could have taken wings and flitted over the bowl of pansies that centered the table. How much less could he say, "Dad, I'm disgusted with your philandering; I wish you hereafter to devote yourself entirely to mother."

"Oh, by the way," his father looked up from his paper, a deep perpendicular wrinkle dividing his high forehead that was so definitely outlined with thick gray-ing hair, "by the way, Dane, if you go in town to-day, you'd better run into Allen and Company, and speed up that shipment of machinery."

Dane continued silently with his waffles.

"Oh, the devil! Why don't I begin before he gets started on that confounded ranch," he chided himself, unavailingly. His love for Judith had excluded all interest in the many brown-hilled acres he had bought with his Grandmother Stillman's money, where he intended to de-

velop oil wells, reservoirs, mountainsides crawling with cantaloups, and purple valleys of alfalfa—where he intended to “make good.”

“Didn’t your foreman write he needed something else?” went on Mr. Elridge.

“Yes, a windmill or tractor, or something—I forget just what.”

“Well, I’d ascertain definitely before I shipped one to him; if he wants to plow ground he’d have the devil of a time doing it with a windmill. *He* may have some object in view, you know.”

Dane felt a flood of resentment at his father’s meaningful emphasis. It was true, he hadn’t concerned himself lately with the vast responsibility that he had taken on his shoulders, but his father had chosen an unfortunate moment for commenting on it. All of his life, Dane had yielded to his temper as naturally as a young tree to a tempest, but though his father had often seen him in a rage,

Dane's life had been curiously unangered by him.

"Now that you've sunk all you've got in this thing," Mr. Elridge pursued with unusual insistence, "it's time you began to realize that it won't rise again by itself."

"Oh, lord, I know it, dad. I don't see what's worked you up to white heat all of a sudden. You've been nagging at me for a week, now. I haven't expected to go out there until September all along. What's the big idea? The land isn't going to walk off the map, is it? Besides, it's *my* money I sunk."

His father's shrewd gray eyes surveyed him with ironical surprise.

"W-ell, it's the money your grandmother *gave* you," he said meaningly.

"That's true, too," Dane flung out, now wholly drunk with anger, "just as your father gave you your start and kept on giving it to you....I've been home just

eight weeks now and that isn't such a hell of a long vacation after this last pretty little year and a half. I'm dead sick of hearing you moan around about that ranch. Don't worry, I'll get along all right—and I won't have to have but *one* start, either."

A formidable light, that he had never seen, flashed from his father's eyes.

"Your confidence is reassuring. But you'll have to learn to govern your temper before you'll make much of a success. You can't manage men until you can manage yourself. If you could, you probably wouldn't have come home a second lieutenant, any more than Bill Newland has."

Dry heat parched Dane's throat. He had to swallow several times before he could speak.

"That's—that's a pleasant thing to hear from your own dad; it shows that you're just the kind of a man I've been finding out you are the last few days—a man that

thinks more of a gold leaf on your shoulder than two wound stripes and a Croix de Guerre,....that's....that's...." he was mouthing his words helplessly. "Why, you're a regular Prussion..a..a"

Evidently Mr. Elridge was himself dismayed at the significance his words had carried; his high cheek-bones reddened slightly, but he said in an even tone:

"You are surely aware that I spoke only of your self-control, but it is enlightening to know your views."

"Well, then, I'll tell you some more of 'em," Dane glared across the table, his butter knife menacing the air. "I think it's about time you cut out your flirtations with women—*kissing* 'em—and, and following 'em around like an old fool; I can just tell you——"

"*Shut up*, you young ass!"

His father's lips did not seem to open, but Dane heard the low words distinctly; their very quietness lending them force.

Mr. Elridge was rising from his chair, smiling over Dane's head, and welcoming their guests who were coming out to the breakfast porch. Dane ceased to breathe. Awkwardly he shoved back his chair, dropping his napkin and fumbling to pick it up. His loud infuriated words seemed echoing back at him, rebounding from the walls. Cold sweat covered him. What kind of a mess had he plunged them all in now?

But not even the faintest promise of a mess ensued. The incoming faces were politely undisturbed, and he heard himself saying, "Good morning," "Hello, Bill. They had reveille earlier than this in my outfit," "Good morning, Mrs. Sangster. Yes, indeed, another peach of a day," and continuing nothings. He had yet to realize that in his world, such messes never intruded themselves upon the surface; they might rage inwardly, but if allowed publicity, they carried their

participants beyond a very definite social boundary.

Dane's father, being nearest to Judith's chair, pulled it out for her and Dane seated Mrs. Sangster, who reached up and fastened a rose-bud in his lapel. As he leaned over her the fragrance of her hair offended him. It was almost like a caress.

"Much obliged," he muttered stiffly, and without looking at Judith, abruptly excused himself and left.

Up in his own rooms, he confronted himself sternly in a long mirror. His face held still the yellowish white color that extreme anger always put there. His eyes were pin-point pupiled, and his thin delicate lips, tremulous. He put out his hands against the sides of the mirror and leaned forward until his forehead almost touched the glass.

"You had it coming to you," he said in a tense sick voice. "So help you God, you'll never lose your temper again."

Then, limp shouldered, he went into his study and dropped into his desk chair. He had expected to drive in to New York later with his father, but now he would go in the roadster and take Judith with him—Judith, even the thought of her was wonderful, it obliterated all things else. He was quickly anxious to tell her what had happened at breakfast, everything. He had been sorting through a pile of letters for the one from his Wyoming foreman, but he dropped his head on his arms and thought of Judith.

Finally he heard the voices of the guests going out into the garden, and went to the window. His father was not with them. Dane stepped out on the porch and called down carelessly:

“Judith, I’ve got to drive into New York right away; will you come along?”

She looked up, shading her eyes with both hands. How wonderful she was!

“Oh, Dane, I don’t believe so. It’s

awfully hot, isn't it? Billy and I thought we'd go out in the canoe after while."

Dane's pulses slowed disconcertingly.

"Can't you wait till to-morrow, old man?" asked Billy who had stopped at Judith's side.

"No," he replied curtly, then, remembering the misery that lay ahead of Billy, he added a hastily cordial, "I wish I could, but I'll come out early and beat you a game of tennis."

"Don't drive too fast," Judith admonished carelessly, going on with Billy.

Dane watched them from behind the curtains, but he saw only the glistening gold leaves on Billy's shoulders. What his father had intimated was true; he had been brave beyond wisdom, but his discipline had many times descended to morale-wrecking anger. Humiliating bitterness surged over him.

"Judith may not think she cares anything about him, but I'll wager she does,"

he goaded himself. "She must be comparing us, too. If she loved me, she'd want to come with me, she wouldn't want to stay here with him——" he yanked his tie savagely and tore his collar.

And then he saw Judith leave Billy when they reached the others, and come running back toward the house. Frantically he searched for another collar, adjusting it with trembling fingers. Perhaps she wasn't coming to see him, after all. He stood still, one hand tightly clutching a chair-back, and waited. He could not hear her down-stairs, and tiny drops of perspiration came out on his forehead. And then came her timid cautious voice:

"Dane! oh, Dane!"

He gave an audible gasp of relief and rushed to the door.

"Yes? Where are you?"

"Here—in the library. Can—can you come here a minute?"

He walked sedately down the stairs, conquering his longing to take them three steps at a time; he even gave Sarah a cool order that took her toward other regions. Judith came across the big room to meet him. She put her arms up around his neck and kissed him.

"I just had to tell you good-by," she whispered, "so I told them I wanted you to take in my tennis racquet to be mended. Are you glad?"

"Oh, Judith," he mumbled into her hair, "you certainly play the devil with me! You acted so cool out there I thought you'd—you'd changed your mind."

"Why, you blessed idiot; you don't want me rushing into your arms publicly, do you?—at least until next week."

The matter-of-fact way in which she tossed the immensities of life into their conversations, struck him dumb. In a week they would be married—*married*.

"Oh, Dane," she held him away from

her, "what were you shouting at your father about? Was—was it about anything we were talking of, last night?"

"Y-es, but I spoiled it all with my damnable temper. Dad had just told me some pretty raw facts; you know, Judith, I'm a poor specimen to go around giving any kind of advice."

"Oh, Dane Elridge, how I do love you," she made amazing answer.

"Then come into town with me; oh, do, Judith; why not?"

"Dear, I promised Billy before I knew you were going. Besides, when I'm with you I can't think of anything but loving you; and I want to think—seriously—about what is best for us to do, all this week.

"Judith, there's only one thing, possibly. We love each other and we're going to be married. I don't see why we have to take a week's vacation from each other."

“Because I’ve got to be sure, Dane, sure that we love each other enough so we won’t get tired after while.”

“Well, how in thunder do you expect to find out, canoeing with Billy? You know perfectly well, Judith, that we’re going to be married. There’s only one way of being sure of a thing, and that’s trying. If we don’t like it, why, then we can find a way out.”

He knew by her eyes that he had said the wrong thing. She stared at him an instant, helpless before his careless philosophy. Then she spoke sharply:

“That’s it, Dane, that’s just the trouble. I’ll never marry you so long as I feel you look no further ahead than the pleasure we may have in each other for the next few months—or years. I’m not going to have my love for you dragged along over a lot of horrible years. I’d rather make myself get over it now, while I’m strong enough.”

He laughed and drew her into his arms again.

“You’re the worried one. I know I’m in for life. Kiss me, *quick*, somebody’s coming.” Her lips seemed sweeter every time he touched them.

“It’s Mrs. Sangster. Isn’t she the pest? I’ll wager she’s just coming back to see if my racquet really is broken. I’ll have to go and punch a hole in it. Oh, darn, best racquet I ever owned, too. Good-by, dear. Come back right after luncheon, won’t you?”

“I’ll say I will,” he assured her, and posed himself in deep absorption in the morning newspaper.

CHAPTER V

MAKING A DAY OF IT

"Oh, Dane!" Mrs. Sangster called in from the doorway, "Judith said you're going in town,—soon?"

"Right away; Tom's bringing the car around now. Anything I can do for you?" He made an especial effort to speak casually for he had a strange feeling of aloofness from her since he and Judith had talked about her. She seemed rather like some sort of a *specimen*, that, if one had the desire, might prove very interesting to experiment with.

"Oh, do be a dear and wait for me." She ran lightly across the room, talking as she went. "I'll chase into my clothes; I simply have to match that yarn for my sweater and it's such a glorious morn—"

Her voice silenced itself in the halls above, leaving a stupid-looking young fellow staring, open-mouthed, as if to swallow the remaining words of her sentence if they ever reached him. Judith came running down the stairs, an almost audible question on her face.

"Now will you tell me why the deuce she doesn't wait and go in with dad?" he demanded.

"Who?"

"Why, her; she's going in with me. She's getting ready."

"Dane, no!"

He answered the accusation in her voice.

"Well, Lord of Heaven! I can't help it. *You* wouldn't go. What could I say to her?"

Judith did not hesitate. "Tell her I'm going—wait. I'll hurry."

"But, sweetheart!" he bolted after her

and caught her arm. "She—she knows you weren't or I'd have said so."

"Oh, so you want her, do you?" Judith flashed at him furiously.

Dane's head felt like a dizzy top. Yesterday Judith had seemed a pillar of poise, some several generations older in knowledge than himself; to-day she was a spoiled youngster flying from one mood to another. But nothing before had made him so sure that she loved him, and his heart glowed within him. He felt pleasantly old, and spoke with calm leniency.

"Off you go again, Judith. Now just stop and think a minute. Who's acting like a baby now? What on earth do you think the woman's going to do to me, anyhow? Do you think I've never been exposed? Why, Judith, you're—silly!"

Immediately another woman evolved out of this complexity that confronted him, a winsome woman against whom there existed no weapon.

“I know I’m silly, Dane. Of course it wasn’t your fault. You see,” she solemnly delivered her all-covering explanation, “you see, I love you—and, and so I can’t help being silly. I don’t care at all what you’ve done up till now, but now, *you’re mine.*”

This ultimatum was no sooner pronounced than Mrs. Sangster came flying down the stairway, her charms undaunted by her gray silk motor cape and close cap, from the back of which floated a long chiffon veil.

“She always wears some darned floating thing,” thought Dane, with unconscious distaste. But Judith greeted her sweetly.

“You look like an Ibsen lady; what a love of a cap.”

Mrs. Sangster gave her a little hug of thanks and they chatted cordially on their way to the car, their arms about each other. Dane walked beside Judith, un-

pleasantly surprised; he would have preferred seeing her be openly ungracious rather than so sweetly deceitful.

"They're all alike—she's as bad as mother," he thought disgustedly, and to her lightly cheerful, "We'll plan on some tennis then, when you get back," he grunted, "Un-hunh. Good-by."

It was no wonder that pretty women turned to men for friendship if women who were not so pretty were such confounded cats to them. He was a little sorry for Mrs. Sangster, but he hoped fervently that she wouldn't talk much. He had said very little to her during the several weeks she had been their house guest, and before that time he had only a bowing acquaintance with her. When they had occasionally been thrown together at the house, it had been a considerable effort for him to appear at ease with her—he was always afraid of saying something ludicrously *young*. He had

realized carelessly, without giving the matter any particular thought, that she was his father's latest "affair" just as several years before her name had been lightly linked with that of Robert Douglas, whose country place adjoined theirs. And after Bob Douglas, there had been Donald Rogers; Dane remembered that there had been rather more than laughing gossip about that affair, but Mrs. Sangster was a cautious firefly and seldom glowed conspicuously in one spot.

Now, as they whirled down the beautiful driveway to the road that winds above the Hudson, the memory of his father kissing her embarrassed Dane somewhat; and yet in a vague way it gave him a feeling of sure-footedness.

"Judith is the dearest girl," was the first thing she said.

Dane digested this remark silently for several hundred yards, and his heart warmed toward her.

"You never knock any one, do you?" he reflected aloud.

"Why, I haven't any reason to; certainly not Judith."

"Oh, sure not; but I was just thinking I've never heard you roast anybody, even when the others were ripping into somebody."

"W-ell, every one is splendid, some way or another. It's just as easy to think about that part of them." Her voice was politely surprised and questioning.

"You've said something. But I can tell you, there's mighty few women who do it."

"Oh, you're a cynic, like your father," she said carelessly. "I'm awfully obliged to you though, Dane, for bringing me. I know you're bored to death."

He glanced at her swiftly, with his father's own mocking smile, and was pleased with the easy retort that came to his lips.

"Now you expect to be told how delighted I am to have you, and I'll be darned if I'll do it."

She laughed prettily.

"Oh, you funny thing; you're really the most puzzling man I know."

He was annoyed at himself for even noticing that she used the word "man," so he dared a yet crisper response.

"Oh, I say, Mrs. Sangster, that *is* a stock remark; every woman I've ever talked to for half an hour, pulls it."

This time her laughter was genuine, so genuine in fact that it roused his doubts as to whether she were laughing at his remark, or at him.

"But you *are* puzzling, you indifferent thing. Oh, please don't throw me out, I'll never say so again, never. I wish, though, you wouldn't call me Mrs. Sangster; I wouldn't feel quite so old and creaky if you'd say, 'Nathalie.' "

He hoped to heaven he wasn't blushing

like a fool. His tongue gathered words from a source unknown.

“Well, if I can furnish any lubricant by saying Nathalie, I’ll be tickled to death to do it. You don’t look as if you needed any, though.”

“Meaning that I’m well varnished?”

“I told you I wouldn’t compliment you; no use trying to force me,—Nathalie.”

“Oh,” she laughed, “but I really need compliments to-day. It’s my birthday, a-nd, I’m thirty years old!”

Dane was a little surprised; he had thought she was older.

“Not really?” he said.

“Now you’re not playing up to form. I *know* you think I’m forty.”

“To tell you the truth, I hadn’t thought about you at all.”

“*Oh!* I surrender; don’t waste any more ammunition. Consider me squelched.”

They kept up their sharp banter until

in some mysterious way she led the conversation around to his mother. She told him she thought his mother was the most wonderful and the dearest woman in the world, and that she had been helped by her more than by any one else in the world.

“Helped you?” Dane inquired blunderingly, thinking of what he had said to Judith.

In a gentle voice Mrs. Sangster explained that her life was not a very happy thing, that it held many sorrows which were bitterly hard to bear. She mentioned her husband with a little shudder in her voice; she had loved him, “as women seldom love,” and things of which she could not bring herself to speak had come between them. She made these confidences in a simple direct manner that kept them from being embarrassing, though Dane was entirely at sea as to what should be said in such circumstances. So he lis-

tened without comment, since none seemed to be expected.

She went on to tell him that when she had first met his father, Mr. Elridge had been at once anxious for her to meet Dane's mother because he knew that his wife could help her so very much—as, indeed, she had.

It all began to strike Dane as a little amusing; she surely had something up her sleeve, all right. She either thought him an unmitigated greenhorn, or else his father *was* one to fall for such obvious stuff as this. He could not resist saying:

“Dad's been a pretty good assistant with the ‘help stuff,’ hasn't he?”

“Oh, your father's a darling—if you're just down on your luck and need to be petted up a little. But your mother—oh, she's wonderful. She's better than any doctor.” Dane laughed shortly.

“Well, she ought to be; dad's always kept her supplied with patients.”

"*How* do you mean?" she said interestedly.

His eyes met hers in a deep even glance.

"What do you think of the Russian situation?" he asked.

"Apropós of diplomacy, I think it's in a bad way," she answered whimsically, her lips severely unsmiling, but she veered off into a serious discourse of the subject that surprised him with her knowledge and grasp of the situation, until his attention lapsed. Then a sudden silence made him aware that she had asked a question.

"I do believe you're in love, Dane Elridge," she accused him, "you've got every symptom."

He turned and glared at her.

"Sometime your thoughts'll get you into trouble."

"Oh, aren't you the high explosive? How many women have you killed?"

He shrugged, and drove faster. She

leaned forward and nearer to him, speaking distinctly:

“Why do you dislike me so fearfully, Dane?”

“Because you ask so many questions.”

They were at One Hundred and Eighty-first Street now and he thanked the lord he would soon be rid of her. Her ripple of pretty laughter made him want to upset the car.

“You really don’t dislike me at all,” she said, “and someday you’ll realize it.”

He made no reply to this candid statement for the simple reason that he didn’t know what to say. Life was speeding up with him lately at such a rate that he was losing his breath.

“Where do you want to stop?” he asked her. “The Ritz?”

“No, you can drop me at the Manhattan if you will. I want to shop all morning. Then can you meet me for lunch?”

The nerve of her! But, after all, it was best to leave her pleasantly.

“Like to, but I’ve got to go over to Brooklyn. I’ll phone dad to pick you up on his way home. I promised I’d go back right after luncheon.”

“But I’ll be through by luncheon time. I—I don’t think you quite realize how really unkind you’ve been to me, you dreadful man.”

He received this with a sarcastic grin which was speedily routed at sight of her face. Her blue eyes had real tears in them and her lips trembled. They really were the prettiest lips he had ever seen—even in the turmoil of his annoyance he thought how darned pretty she was; and now that she had descended to the comprehensible weeping female, he felt more competent. W-ell, after all, girls and women (of her type) were pretty much the same. It was his first discovery about women older than himself.

"On the square, I'm sorry, Mrs. Sang—Nathalie, I mean. I've just been kidding. I didn't suppose it would be any hardship for you to go home with dad. If you're ready to go right after lunch, I'll be glad to take you, of course."

She smiled, mistily.

"I'm such a fool," she said in self-reproof, "but I—I don't always know just when I'm going to break down. This is a pretty hard day for me always. It's been just eight years ago this morning since my baby died—the last thing I had of happiness."

Dane's mental equilibrium re-centered violently; what wouldn't she spring on him next? First it had been birthdays, then his mother's kindness, then marital sorrows, and now *babies*—dead babies. It all struck him as a little funny.

But her face, smiling at him wistfully as he handed her out of the car, appealed to him suddenly as a really sad face.

However, to save his soul he couldn't have said anything sympathetic about the baby just then. It was inconceivable that she should ever have *had* a baby, for she seemed as foreign to motherhood as the chugging green roadster.

"We won't talk going home, and we'll hit it off better," he suggested, ignoring the baby, but squeezing her hand by way of sympathy for her loss of it.

"Do come to lunch with me; I won't talk," she urged lingeringly.

So he said he would, and to avoid becoming further involved, he started the car while she was still talking.

It was pleasanter having luncheon with her than he had expected, although, strangely enough, he had caught himself several times during the morning thinking about her and wondering if she really liked him, or if she were amusing herself with him, or if she perhaps knew that he

had seen his father kiss her and was worried about it. He could come to no definite conclusion about her.

But he found her vivacious and full of laughter. She had "got hold of herself" she told him, and she put him at his ease immediately. She was by far the most beautiful woman in the gay dining-room and he enjoyed being with a woman who attracted every one's admiring attention. He felt a decided man of the world, and glowed pleasantly as he ordered an extravagant luncheon.

He never knew exactly how it happened that they did not go home that afternoon. They started. He drove her to several upper Fifth Avenue shops on the way, and thus got stalled in a "Victory" parade which held them up for half an hour, happening to find friends of Mrs. Sangster in the limousine beside them. So they all drove back to the hotel for tea. And then they danced; and afterward a French of-

ficer kept them until dinner time listening to his vivid accounts of bringing down German planes. So they all had dinner together. Several times Dane thought of Judith. Once he said to Mrs. Sangster while they were dancing:

"I guess Bill and Judith'll wonder what's become of us for that tennis game."

"They won't even miss us," she assured him, "those two will be married before his furlough's over. If they miss us at all, they'll be glad they do."

Dane ceased to hear the music, omitted several steps, and completely changed the glad course of the unfortunate couple behind them.

"Aw, she'll never marry slow old Bill," he managed to say in an uninterested manner; but from that instant he fretted to get away, and once started home, he drove like a demon all the way, but it was nine-thirty and more when they turned

into the wide elm-bordered driveway. He could not have repeated one sentence that Mrs. Sangster had said to him, much less anything he had said to her. His mind was full of Judith—what had she been doing all day—what had Bill said to her—perhaps he had drowned her in that sailboat—what did she think he had been doing all day—would she be angry—would he have a chance to kiss her—

His father sauntered down from the wide veranda to greet them.

“Well, you two have certainly made a day of it.” His voice held a peculiar note, as of a vexatious question directed at the woman.

Dane said nothing. He stayed in the car and himself drove it back to the garage.

CHAPTER VI

TWO NOTES AND A POSTSCRIPT

HE came into the house by a side entrance and found Mrs. Lawson reading in the south library. To his, "Hello, Aunt Lawson, where's everybody?" Mrs. Lawson responded with a good-naturedly annoyed:

"I don't know and I don't care, if they'll only let me read a minute in peace. I think Judith and Billy went off somewhere to a dance across the lake."

Dane went directly up to his own rooms where he threw himself down on a couch and let his mind wander into suppositions about Judith. But he had lain there only five minutes when he heard his mother's light running tap on his door.

He had not spoken with her since the day before when she was painting on the lawn. Now he would have to apologize. He had promised Judith he would; but if she could only have let him alone until morning.

"May I come in, dear?" came her thin cheery voice.

"Why, I guess so," he said ungraciously; why *did* she always strike him at the wrong time?

She came directly to the couch and, leaning down, smoothed her hand back over his black hair.

"Judith has told me," he could hear her long uneven breath. "I spoke too hastily yesterday, Dane. I'm very sorry. I—"

He sat bolt upright, tossing his hair back with an irritated fling of his head.

"Oh, good lord, mother! Why are you always going around apologizing? You didn't call me down half enough and you know it. Why don't you say so?"

She had backed away from him, looking, as she often did, as if she had expected him to strike her. She wore a brick-red tunic arrangement of rough silk embroidered in black yarn, and her hair was disheveled as though she had been lying down. Several faded unsuccessful streaks exhibited themselves insistently among the bright brown.

"Well, Dane," she murmured, "you do astonish me."

"I guess that's nothing unusual. But I'd think you'd get tired apologizing for what other people do to you. Now I acted like the devil yesterday and I'm sorry about it, and it's my job to apologize—not yours."

"Is that what you're doing?" she inquired, smiling.

"I am," he grinned, and lowered his voice. "But, but say, mother, why don't you quit painting your hair? It looks like the very deuce. Let it get gray. You don't fool anybody."

She put her hands up to her head and made a futile effort to smooth the straying hairs. Her lips trembled a little but her voice was quiet enough:

“I dislike it dreadfully, myself, but I—I—would you like it better gray?”

“Of course I would,” he nodded vigorously. He was in a mood that the quickly controlled tremor of her lips touched immeasurably.

Swinging his feet to the floor, he put his hands out to her with an impulsive jerk and took firm hold of her cold ones that she put, questioningly, into his.

“I can’t half tell you how sorry I am about a whole lot of things, mother; but, but I’ll try to make a better showing after this.”

The cords in her throat contracted so tightly that they became visible, and he dropped his eyes uncomfortably before the emotion that flamed into her sensitive slender face. She lifted his hands

and bowed her head on them; and he felt her kiss them. A sickening embarrassment took hold of him. She knew he hated this sort of thing—it was all dramatic and unnecessary. He pulled away and she immediately dropped his hands, turning quickly from him and going over to the window where she stood silently looking out over the moonlit grounds. Standing with her back to him, she might easily have been the girl her straight queer gown suggested. Her figure was straight and slender and her ankles were even prettier than Judith's.

Suddenly, uttering a short exclamation, she brought a note out of one of her big pockets. "Oh, Dane, I forgot. Judith left this note for you if you got home before she did."

He lunged up from the couch and took the folded paper from her. His mother watched him while he read it, watched his face change from its eagerness to childish

ill-humor. He seemed very young again all of an instant. The note was short.

“Did you forget you promised to come back early and play tennis? I wonder if all your promises are going to be kept like this first one. At least you are giving me something to think about during this week. You must have had a very pleasant time with Mrs. Sangster. J.”

“Oh, damn it!” he exploded. “When did she give you this?”

“Just as she was leaving.”

“Yes—to go off with Bill, splendid fine Bill, be true to her always, a wonderful match, sterling qualities—*bah*. Where’d they go?”

“Janet Heald phoned they’re having a dance out on the pavilion,” answered his mother quietly, “so Judith and Billy rowed across the lake.”

“She’s got a lot of room to kick about *me*,” he crumpled the note and hurled it over into the waste-basket, glowering

down at his mother as though she were the offender. "She's crazy about Bill Newland and she knows it. You can't tell anything by what she says, she's just as deceitful as they get—*she is*, I say! Didn't I hear her this morning, ripping into Nathalie one minute and palavering over her the next?"

"My de-ar; and only yesterday you rebuked me scathingly for not saying 'Mrs. Sangster.' You aren't exactly consistent, are you? And I'm sure you don't know what you're saying, Dane. You can't love Judith, if you do not trust her—even with Billy whom she's gone about with all her life. Judith's being with Billy doesn't affect her love for you in any way, just as your being with Mrs. Sangster all day hasn't made you love Judith any less, has it?"

He sneered contemptuously at the ridiculousness of the question.

"*That* woman; well s-ay, mother,

what'd you think I am? You make me sick."

For she had looked so plainly relieved that there was no mistaking her anxiety. He peeled off his coat and threw it down on the couch, lounging back into a big tufted chair.

"I *have* known men, of discernment, who have not been so scornful of Nathalie's charms," she said with a touch of irony, settling herself nervously on a straight-backed chair, rather like a bird on an uncomfortable nest.

"Maybe you have. But Judith knows I'm about as much interested in any other woman as I am in spiritualism. She's nothing but a jealous little cat. You can say all you want to, but, after all, Nathalie's less of a cat than—than any of you."

"In what way do you think I am a cat?" she asked quickly.

"Every way," he retorted instantly,

“only you—you’ve cut your claws off and all you’ve got left is the purr.”

His mother gave a queer startled little laugh. She started to put her hands up to her head in her characteristic gesture, held them an instant in the air, waveringly, and finally sheltered them in her big pockets.

“Does Nathalie never ‘purr’?”

He wondered how in the mischief things had worked themselves about until he found himself championing Mrs. Sangster.

“Let me tell you she said more decent things about people this morning than I’ve heard—oh, well, what in the deuce are we sitting here chewing the rag for?”

“I’m going in a minute, Dane. But, oh, don’t—*don’t* start in this way with Judith, dear. There are so few girls as unspoiled as Judith—so absolutely open and frank with their emotions. And every time you let a nasty mood take hold

of you, you're weakening yourself far more than you realize. You ought—"

"Say!" he cut in, "what are you pulling off, mother?—a lecture on something you don't know anything about. Great Scott, *she's* the jealous one, sore because—"

"Stop, Dane! don't say another word about Judith. You'll only be ashamed of it afterward." She stood up and took hold of the back of the chair. "I don't think at all that Judith is jealous of you, but if she is, it's perfectly natural. When you love any one, I think you're always jealous of them—but you're *not suspicious*. And that's what makes me very, very afraid that you've done wrong to think of marrying Judith. Jealousy is always a little dignified by the love that prompts it, but suspicion has nothing back of it but passion."

"I say, mother, you're in great form; rhetorical and delicate. It's a shame to discourage you, but honestly, I'm sleepy."

She felt about the chair-back as if for a firmer place to hold.

“Very well; but here’s another note from Judith; she asked me to give it to you five minutes after the first one.”

“What is this?—some sort of a game?”

Unanswering she handed him another note that he took without looking at her, muttering something about “all this darn foolishness.” He felt ludicrously like a sullen youngster being coaxed out of a temper but he could not resist quickly reading the note.

“My! but you’ve been angry for five minutes, haven’t you? Old Silly! You deserve to be punished, for I think you might have telephoned when you found you couldn’t come out early. I’ve told your mother all about us, that maybe in a week we’ll be married, and everything. She’s awfully glad. And, dear, I told her you’ve always been terribly fond of her but that something about you keeps you from showing how you really feel. She said she understood. And *do* be just as dear to her as you possibly can. Remem-

ber, that she's going to be my mother, too, and I want her to be very, very happy."

The postscript that followed was in the tiniest of writing as though the words were bashful of being read.

"I expect we'll be home, late; but if you hear us come in and then wait fifteen minutes, and then tiptoe to the south porch, I think there'll be some one there to say good night to you."

Dane's nose became alarmingly threatened with sharp pricking sensations and he wiggled it vigorously to dispel the symptoms; he had felt ready to cry the last two days at the drop of a hat. He looked over at his mother, curiously; she had taken up some kodak pictures of his ranch and was looking through them. She was a pretty good little fellow, after all; instead of resenting her presence there as an intrusion, he was suddenly glad that she had come. Had Judith hypnotized him? Did she run him body and soul,

that she was able to regulate his moods as easily as she would turn the electric lights on and off? But at least this last mood offered him the comfort that comes with the leaving of pain and he felt willing to enter whole-heartedly into its possibilities, but speech did not come easily. It never did. Anger seemed to be his only freely expressed emotion, but he put forth a valiant effort to give out the kindness that invaded him, a flattering cordiality in his voice.

“Well, suppose you sit down and talk a while, mother.”

Her expression was comic. He grinned widely, his face flushing.

“This note was more like it. Here, sit down here.” Rising, he took her shoulders and pushed her gently back into the big chair, throwing himself full length on the couch, facing her, while his words galloped on into green pastures. “This being in love business has about got the best

of me; but you know I've an idea if it doesn't kill me it may do me good. Oh, lord, mother! I wish you could see how funny you look!"

He began laughing uproariously—never had he known such pleasure in laughter; he reveled in it. His mother's face might have been a sculptor's image of bewilderment.

"Now go ahead and say everything that's on your mind," he urged her. "I want you to rip into me for fair; don't wait; begin while I feel like this."

His mother moistened her lips.

"You do love Judith," she said with an emphasis that spoke to herself rather than to him, "you love her."

"You've hit it, mother; *I love her.*" He lay back among the plump cushions, basking in this new ease of spirit like a cat in unexpected sunshine. He could see that his mother was at a loss to know what to do. She was staring at him, smil-

ing, pathetic in her uncertainty. He went easily to her rescue, urged on at the back of his brain by the blissful refrain, "In a little while I'll kiss her good night—kiss her good night—kiss her good night."

"You don't know what's struck me, do you, mother? Well, neither do I. But let's *talk!* You've always wanted to, and now's your chance—I may never feel like this again. How in the deuce do I happen to be such a queer one, mother?"

"Why, Dane, do—do you feel that you're 'queer'?" Her voice was like a tight little wire. She reached up and pulled off the desk light so that her face was in shadow.

"Feel it? Why, sure I do. I've always been bottled up, sort of never can get the cork out. Even the shrapnel couldn't knock it out of me. Until right now, I mean until yesterday, I don't believe I've ever said things I really thought, in all my life. Now, I'm afraid I'm going to

go round chattering to strangers and making a worse ass of myself in the other direction. But over there, I never could sit around and talk the way the other fellows did; g-osh, I used to want to, sometimes."

"If I should tell you something, Dane, something I never expected to speak of so long as I lived, will you try not to think I'm—I'm, well, trying to be theatrical or anything of the kind?"

He had never heard her voice so empty and dull of tone. It usually held a brightness as artificial as did her hair.

"Why, sure," he said, wondering, and quickly uncomfortable.

"You are realizing now, Dane, how absolutely your love for Judith is going to govern you; you can imagine perhaps how you would suffer if you should find out she shared her love with some one else. And when you've married Judith, dearwell, thenthen you'll know how

happy I was....years ago. And then, during the months before you were born, I found out that there...there were other women, I mean another woman. So,.... so that all the time I was planning for you and trying to make myself happy in your coming, I knew that your father was kissing that other woman and taking her into his arms....and....and loving her. I was pretty young then, and I didn't bear it very bravely, though I never spoke of it to a living soul.

"That," she ended in the same inflectionless voice, "I have always thought is why you have such an unfortunate disposition. I wasn't able, either, to say the things that were in my heart."

"Why, my God, mother!" Dane's voice came in a sort of hurt whine for in the most curious way, Judith seemed involved in the pity that swept over him, so that his love for her, quick and strong and protective, reached out and enveloped his

mother. "Why, my God, mother, how could you go on living with him?"

"No!" she cried sharply, "don't misunderstand, Dane. I'm not trying to prejudice you—I'm not complaining. It isn't as if you didn't know that your father has, oh—has cared about other women; but you've always regarded it so lightly. I thought—" she groped for words, finding them with difficulty. "I only wanted you to realize, now that you love Judith, that—that—"

"I expect to be true to Judith, mother," he said stiffly, in miserable embarrassment. "Did she ask you to tell me this?"

He knew even while he spoke, that she had not.

"*What?* Why, how could Judith—why, Judith doesn't know anything, of —" She suddenly remembered what he had told her about seeing his father kiss Mrs. Sangster. "Oh, you mean because of yesterday. But you see Judith would

never say anything about that to *me*. Judith thinks I'm very happy, Dane, and I always want her to; she thinks I only laugh at your father's little affairs. This afternoon when we were talking she mentioned it several times—my always being cheerful, I mean."

"Oh, sure," muttered Dane stupidly. The fact that his mother felt herself secure in her pose of happiness struck him with overwhelming force; she actually believed that their friends accepted her pretense as real indifference. Why shouldn't she?—no doubt every one pretended to accept them, just as Judith had done.

Through all these years she had laughed her overly-merry laugh; hummed little snatches of hollow song whenever there was any one near to hear; braved out pathetic jokes about his father's philandering; thrown herself heart and soul into anything that offered—poetry, settlement work, suffrage, now it was painting. But

through all these same years she had never complained—never descended to seek for sympathy. Dane stared at her, curiously fascinated, and with the idea of comforting her, said thoughtfully:

“But still, mother, it’s you that dad really cares about—these—these other affairs don’t mean a darn thing in the long run.”

But his mother, having his own and Judith’s life uppermost in her mind, turned his words directly back at him:

“Oh, Dane, don’t think that way! Oh, if I could only make you understand! It’s going to be so different with Judith than with me, and it will break your whole life if you lose her, Dane. I feel somehow, that you’ve inherited my—my, oh, I don’t know how to say it—my *helplessness* of love. You *must* keep Judith, and you never can, if you don’t honor her love. She’s so strong, and she’s too proud to share herself. And she’s another genera-

tion—she knows other values in life, than love. Women are getting to be more like men; they know the value of work, of having an economic value.”

Dane’s mind recalled sharply what Judith had said about earning two hundred and fifty dollars a month. His mother was leaning forward in her chair, her face ashen with the same yellowish pallor that came to him with anger; but something so vivid, so intense, looked out from her brown eyes that she gave the impression of glowing, as though her cheeks were flushed. She spoke faster and faster. .

“You—you think you’re altogether like your father, Dane, but you haven’t his—his adaptability; you’ll never be able to turn to something else if one thing disappoints you. And if you love Judith the way I feel you do, you must never risk losing her, remember it, Dane, or—or—”

—“Or I’ll go to the devil, straight-oh,”

Dane finished grimly. He was tremendously affected, but he made a desperate struggle not to show it. "I've had that same pleasant thought several times, myself; but that's no reason you should make yourself sick, mother. Let's not get so tragic about it."

She was silent, so he floundered on:

"Anyhow, mother, I think you're a real brick, not to go whining around all the time. Here I've been squealing every minute Judith is out of my sight, and you've never squealed once. Why, no one would ever have any idea you—you worry, or anything, I mean that dad's affairs get under your skin."

"Oh, of course not," she murmured.

A great hot lump came up into Dane's throat. He wanted suddenly, and without any feeling of surprise, to touch her, to put his arms about her and comfort her. He couldn't do it, but he did the best he could do.

"Well, Judith certainly loves you," he offered her comfortingly. "I think she loves you more right now than she does Aunt Lawson."

"Yes. I've always loved Judith," she said only. Her quietness somewhat alarmed him.

"Yes. She—she told me you used to sing her little songs."

Silence. He leaned forward, propped on one elbow. Her eyes were closed.

"Say, mother—"

"Yes, dear."

"Do—do you mind telling me if it still hurts like it used to—about dad?"

Peering, he saw her smile a little, but she did not open her eyes.

"You wouldn't think so," she said apologetically, "but it does."

Remorse, so sharp that it was pain, gripped Dane. His throat made a queer choking, guttural sound and he slowly got to his feet. Her eyes opened then, her

lips parted and her hands crept slowly up over her breast to her face.

“Why, Dane!” she cried out in a broken voice that seemed shamelessly to bare all her valiant littleness, and shrinking down into the big chair, she buried her head in her arms and sobbed chokingly, like a child. He dropped down in front of her, and put his arms up about her slender little body, muttering hoarsely:

“Poor little old mother, poor little old mother—”

It was this way that his father found them. The door into the hall had been slightly ajar and he had pushed it open silently. He stood, staring at them, the keenness of his large featured face veiled with incredulity. He was like a statue.

Dane scrambled to his feet and confronted the door, his hair disheveled and his face furiously red.

“C-can’t you knock?” he stammered, stepping in front of his mother to screen her from his father’s eyes.

"I beg your pardon," apologized his father, in a voice which sounded as if it were pulled from the depths of astonishment, and he backed out, slowly and quietly closing the door. Dane turned and looked down at his mother. She was staring at the closed door, her face as empty of emotion as a piece of faded cloth. Unsteadily she groped to her feet, her hands fumbling about for a place to hide themselves and re-finding her pockets. Her mouth opened several times, wordlessly. Then she said:

"Your father is probably telephoning the county asylum."

Her words were such a surprise that he burst into wild meaningless laughter, and she laughed too, in breathy, nerve-shaken little gasps.

When she reached the door, he strode after her and took firm hold of her arm, tipping her face upward so that he peered straight down into her wet eyes.

"Now see here, mother: listen to me.

Don't you go trying to explain things, and and if dad says anything to you, why—why answer him back; you're too meek with him, too anxious to please him; just spit something right out at him."

She gave another little burst of hysterical laughter, and was slipping through the door like a mouse escaping from a playful friendly cat, but he tightened his arms about her in a fierce hug, leaned down and kissed her lips.

Alone in his room again, he threw himself down in the big chair with a soft whistle of relief. Now he could think of Judith. He stretched his legs out wearily and discovered that his body was so tired it ached. His mind went wavering confusedly through the day's maze of happenings, but their unpleasantness was comfortingly dulled by the anticipation of Judith's kiss. Would she never come home?

At last he heard them. It was nearly midnight. Judith's rooms were on the

same floor on the other side of the house. He took out his watch, not trusting to the clock, and counted out the longest fifteen minutes of his life. Then he waited five minutes over time, put on his coat, and hurried stealthily down the hall. But she was not there, yet; the shadowed canopied corner of the big porch was empty.

And she did not come—she did not come! In weary misery, he wondered if he could bear it. He sat upright and rigid in the swinging hammock, suffering; watching the moon-made shadows grow longer and longer, and filled with such pain of disappointment that he was a little frightened at his weakness.

“But I’m not getting mad,” he told himself over and over, with the most peculiar satisfaction. He sat there, stiffly waiting, until half past one; then he stretched himself full length to wait a little longer, stuffing one of the hard porch pillows under his head.

CHAPTER VII

THEIR PLAIN TALK

THE sun shining in his eyes wakened him, pulling him, unwilling, from a soul-exalting dream where bands were playing and trumpets sounding, and the general of his old division was announcing through a gigantic megaphone that he—Dane Stillman Elridge—was being made the commander-in-chief of the assembled armies of the United States, in recognition of the fact that he had not lost his temper when the Queen of Belgium had failed to keep an appointment with him and had kept him waiting in the rain and mud of No-Man's Land, until he had caught the grippe, from which he was still suffering.

He was just limping up to receive his

new rank when he found himself rudely transferred to an uncomfortable hammock where he was lying in a painfully cramped posture with the sunshine assaulting his smarting eyes.

Achingly, he readjusted himself to reality, grunting and stretching. He sat up and swung his legs. W-ell, Judith hadn't come, but what of it? Why in the name of sense hadn't he gone to bed? Now, in the freshness of the bright morning, his misery of the night before seemed not only incredible but idiotic.

It must be late. He heard voices down in the garden, and laughter—Judith's laughter; a hearty joyous mirth that made him glow all over and brought him to his feet with a start, anxious to see her. He hurried back to his rooms, turned on his bath, and got out of his wrinkled clothes.

His man had opened a big box from Norworth's and had laid two Norfolk suits, one of gray and one of brown, out

on the bed. New boots stood on the floor: gloves and a Stetson hat were on a chair. The door to his sleeping porch was closed and the porch darkened; he was probably supposed to be out there, sleeping.

He rang to have his breakfast sent up; somehow he didn't want to risk running into his father; he wanted to have time to think over what he was going to say to him, something that should be quietly impressive and dignified, something absolutely immune from anger. An astounding good humor invaded him—his first pride of control; infinite satisfaction seemed circulating in his blood.

Judith's laughter floated up again.

"She had some good reason for not coming," he counceled himself beatifically. "By the Gods I'll bet I never let go of myself again."

After his bath he swallowed his breakfast hastily and then got into the new clothes—the soft collared gray shirt and

well-made gray suit, the high boots that were the same maroon color as his old puttees, and the straight-brimmed Stetson hat. He felt a little as he had done when he first tried on his army uniform—a sort of grim realization of what the clothes signified—of big untried things that were to test his value in life. For he had voluntarily, against his father's advice, chosen this ranch with its many undeveloped acres, as his economic responsibility—his job.

He was twisting about in front of his mirror, judicially appraising himself, when he heard Judith's voice on the stairs, calling down to some one that she'd be back in a minute. He rushed into his study, flung open the curtains, and stuck his head out the hall door, calling to her cautiously.

"Well, you lazy thing," she cried out, appearing at the other end of the hall.

He beckoned to her with one finger. As she came toward him he noticed a tiny edging of embroidery beneath her white sport skirt.

"Say, your petticoat shows."

"I know it. I came up to fix it. Billy just told me."

"He did? Well, I like his nerve."

"How about your own, silly?" She was close to him now, but he still stood back of the door, grinning, only his head visible.

"I wait until I'm engaged to a girl before I even notice such things."

"O-h, such restraint!" She glanced behind her and seeing no intrusive eyes, put her hand up and patted his cheek; "You old ostrich—not dressed yet and it's nearly luncheon time. I dare you to come out."

"I am dressed; I dare you to come in."

Without hesitation she pushed the door open, her eyes widening approvingly at

sight of him. She brought her hands together, fingers clasped, and surveyed him rapturously.

“Well, how do you like me? This is my ranch outfit. You’ll have to get some rough duds when you come to visit your—your ranch.”

“You mean my husband,” she corrected with a little smile, “I never knew any one so scared of nice words as you are. But I’m wondering if what I hear is true—that ranchers never kiss their wives.”

Whereupon he spent a blissful five minutes in thorough reparation.

“Sweetheart, *why* didn’t you come last night?” he finally asked her. They were sitting on the window-seat, now, with their arms about each other.

“Oh, that’s so! Why, of all things; you know I was expecting you to be in a fearful temper. What’s happened to you?—are you ill, perhaps?”

He thrilled with a well-earned pride; he felt just as he had done in his dream when the general was lauding him before the assembled armies.

“Well, honey, I made up my mind yesterday morning that it’s about time I grew up. First you and mother lighting into me, and then dad; he reminded me that if I’d learned to control myself I’d probably have come home a major as well as Bill Newland—yes, I know it sounded pretty raw, but I guess it was true enough. I hadn’t exactly looked at it that way before. So—so last night I disciplined myself a little. I waited till after one, and then I went to sleep out there, didn’t wake up till half an hour ago. Gosh, I was stiff.”

“You blessed precious darling,” solemnly comforted Judith, the delight of her penitence making him wonder how much happier he could get before something inside him would burst and kill him.

Though Judith's love expressed itself so frankly, almost without reserve, there was always a clean pride in her brown eyes that kept him strangely humble. It was like being blinded before a great white light.

"Aunt Ellen was awake when I got home, and of course I had to pretend to go to bed," she explained penitently, "and she talked and talked and talked! Oh, I'll never forgive myself, Dane, but she talked me to sleep. Anyhow, I dreamed about you all night long."

Dane cupped her face in his hands and lowered his head until his face almost rested on hers.

"Judith, why don't you tell Aunt Lawson about us? I must say, sweetheart, I don't get you a little bit on this 'week' stuff."

Judith gave him a quick kiss.

"You old doubting Dane. I don't tell her, because I want to get everything so

settled and sure in my own mind, that all of her ravings won't affect me at all. Aunt Ellen's an old dear, but I've never known her to change her opinions in all my life; and just now she's having a fresh fit of rage against your father on account of Mrs. Sangster—"

"Well, she takes good care not to show it," Dane interposed sullenly; "she's always jollying around with him."

"Oh, of course she doesn't quarrel with him, or throw things at him in his own house; but, you can't always tell a person's real ideas by the way he acts."

"No, I should say you can't; why, yesterday morning, I'd have thought Mrs. Sangster was your dearest friend."

Judith answered laughingly though she flushed a little.

"I *knew* you thought I was a horrid cat; your face was too funny for anything; and I just loved you for it! Oh, you're lots nicer than you think you are, Dane.

I think a certain amount of deceit is necessary—Aunt Ellen says it is if you expect to have any human companionship at all. But she always says, ‘Decent people tell the truth to some one, always, they have one person they never deceive, no matter what happens nor what they do.’ With me, you see, that person has always been Aunt Ellen until, well, about three weeks ago. And now, it’s getting to be you.”

“And with me it’s getting to be you,” he repeated slowly; it promised indeed to be a splendid doctrine if there was such comfort in telling her even the unpleasant things. “Oh, that makes me think, Judith, last night mother and—”

“Oh, my de-ar!” she broke in, “have you seen your mother?”

“Not this morning; why? What in the deuce has she pulled off, now?”

. His old familiar irritation roughened his voice. Judith puckered her lips at him

reprovingly and smoothed his father's frown out of his forehead.

"It's her hair; she's bleached it. I mean she's had Jennie shampoo all the brown off it and it's the queerest sort of greenish gray you can imagine. She came down to breakfast, late, and we all just gasped. She looks so different, you know. She's got it drawn up straight, fluffed a little but not much, and rolled into a soft little knot on the back of her head; and such a ghastly color; she does look too queer for anything."

"I should think she might. Great Scott, how she does go at things. I told her last night she looked like a fright, but I didn't expect—"

"Is that the way you acted, when I did so want you to be nicer to her?"

He grinned contritely, and kissed the bronzed brown curl that flaunted its prettiness behind her ear.

"Sweetheart, I followed your instruc-

tions to the letter. Yes, on the square I did. And you're right, Judith, mother's a mighty fine little sport. I found out that much last night. I think she was glad I told her about her hair."

"I thought the minute I saw her that you were at the bottom of it," Judith went on. "Well, she came in trying to look unconcerned and in that funny joky way of hers said something about it being the fashion to revert to nature. We all just stared at her for a minute. Then your father began making fun, of course, and laughed and laughed. But Mrs. Sangster said" (here Judith brought a honeyed sweetness into her deep young voice), "Oh, Jane dear, really I adore it; your ears are too pretty for words—why have you hidden them all this time? Don't you believe a word that brute of a man says. Why, you look like an old painting.' And your father said 'old' was right, and then Aunt Ellen flared up at him and—"

“What did old Keith say?” Dane put in curiously.

“Oh, he was lovely; I was quite thrilled. I sat beside your mother or I couldn’t have heard. Her hand was lying on the table by her plate and he put his hand over it and said in that quiet ‘nothing matters to me’ way of his, ‘When it recovers it’s going to be a lot better this way, Jane. I see you’ve still got that little curl back of your ear.’ ”

“You’ve got one back of your ear, too,” he informed Judith seriously, kissing it again to prove his assertion. “Do you really suppose that Newland still cares about mother?”

“Why, of course he does. They were engaged, Aunt Ellen said, when she fell so desperately in love with your father. Isn’t it a pity—” she stopped abruptly with a confused flush.

“Go ahead—say it. I’m wondering myself. But I know there’s something

wrong, somehow. I can't think I've got an all-around bounder for a dad," he said, his eyes miserable.

"Oh, Dane, of course not! Why if there weren't fine things about him your mother never could have loved him through all these years."

He turned to her eagerly, tense with the desire to lighten her overly tragic attitude against his father, for he was acutely conscious that her prejudice was unmeaningly directed against himself.

"Why, surely there are, Judith; you know, after all, dad's not so different from other men, now is he?"

"You mean you think most men aren't true to their wives and—and that it is right?"

He glowed with discomfort. What nakedness words were able to clothe or to expose. He felt as if her curiously intent eyes were searching to his very soul for a conviction that was not there. But

he *must* ward off her doubts; to do so, he assumed a reassuring vehemence.

“Right? You know I think it’s dead wrong, Judith. But well, I only meant dad isn’t the only man who’s ever done such things, but we just don’t think about them because they don’t directly concern us.”

“*I* think about them, Dane. And I’m sure most girls think about those things a great deal more frankly than they used to. I wish, Dane,—don’t you think we might talk to each other—plainly; just—just as if we were married?”

Involuntarily, his arms tightened about her; he kissed her, muttering in a confused way, “Why sure, sweetheart.” His heart leaped, for her words had quickened his pulses strangely and her soft lips were like fuel for the flame of his desire. Her eyes, close under his, filled with a startled shyness and she tried to draw away from him.

"Oh, Dane, pl-ease." But he only silenced her lips with kisses.

"Why shouldn't I love you! why shouldn't I? Do you think I can go on kissing you forever and not *want* you?"

Exerting all her fine young strength she struggled out of his arms, her breasts counting her quickened breaths. Through the riot of his senses he was slowly angered.

"You love me a lot, don't you—if I'm so disagreeable to you as all that?"

She leaned toward him and put her cool palms against his cheeks, but he sat back, not touching her, his eyes hurt and resentful.

"It's just because you're *not* disagreeable to me that—that I wanted you to stop," she whispered, the last word ending in the soft hush of a soothing kiss, while his arms returned to their heaven.

"But, sweetheart, I think it would really kill me to wait for you very long,"

he whispered back, adding with a little laugh because of the crimson that stained her cheeks. "You said you wanted to talk plainly."

Her eyes met his, shy but unashamed.

"I don't mind. Do—do you suppose it can be so—so perfectly wonderful to every one?"

"It doesn't seem possible, does it?" he said, laughing with a huge tenderness.

"But do you know, Dane, I can understand how this wouldn't last unless there's a fine big love between two people."

"Yes, oh, yes," he said stupidly.

Her head was against his shoulder and he put his face down upon her bright hair. Her hair was soft and fresh smelling but it held no perfume. A little memory of the fragrance in Mrs. Sangster's hair passed through his mind, and he was annoyed at the intrusion of such a thought.

"Dane, have you known so very many girls?" Judith asked timidly. "You know, dear, what I mean."

"Oh, Judith," he remonstrated, "I thought you never wanted me to mention them. I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am, now."

"Really sorry, Dane?"

"Yes."

"Tr-uly, Dane?"

It was incredible that she could pull the truth from him, when his own mind scarcely knew what the truth was.

"Well, dear, it isn't as if I'd murdered somebody, or been a thief, if you mean *that*? But I—well, I wish I hadn't, that's all."

"Y-es, just as you wouldn't like to think of *my* having had the same experiences?"

This suggestion was so remote that it only amused him. His mother had said that Judith was of a new generation which demanded new standards; but this was no doubt the way girls always resented such things. It seemed natural enough.

"It's mighty unfair, all right," he conceded easily.

Judith drew out of his arms, left the window-seat, and walked away from him. Taking his new gauntlets from the desk she slowly tried them on, her face quiet with thought, while he lounged back in the window-seat and watched her. Everything about her utterly satisfied him; he liked the little backward tilt to her head, and her girlish stateliness. Something indefinable about her lent him a sense of surety in himself—a sort of faith. She came back to him smiling a little, and stood in front of him. He reached up and took her hands and swung them lightly.

"My old rancher," she said caressingly. He bent his head on her hands.

"Oh, Judith, I do love you so—so terribly much," he told her with a choking throat.

She kissed the top of his head.

"Enough to last always, I wonder?"

His silence was like a rebuke.

“Oh, Dane, I know we can’t be *sure* of the future,” she said contritely, “the more I try to convince myself, the less certain I am. But—but let’s pledge ourselves to one thing, Dane: that we’ll always be honest with each other, that we’ll tell each other the truth, no matter what that truth is; and that we’ll both try our hardest to accept that truth—justly.”

“Yes, dear,” he said and took both her hands again; he only knew that he loved her and his mind held no room for reasoning on all these indefinite matters. Only his great desire for her shone in his eyes. She smiled a little wistfully.

“I’ll tell Aunt Ellen about us, to-night,” she said.

CHAPTER VIII

WOMEN ARE THREE

THAT same morning, just before luncheon, he "talked to his father." He was just changing from his tennis clothes into fresh flannels after a brisk game in which he and Mrs. Sangster had beaten Judith and Bill Newland rather badly. Poor Bill—no wonder he couldn't hit a ball; Bill was beginning to scent the situation, and all morning Dane had been conscious of a baffled wondering expression on Bill's hurt good-natured face. Dane was keenly sorry for him; in fact it seemed to Dane, that, never having known the meaning of sympathy, he was suddenly beginning to feel sorry for everybody.

He told himself he was in a good mood

to speak to his father; he took quiet council with himself that he would not lose his temper did the heavens fall; but he wished extremely that he had a clearer idea of exactly what it was he meant to say to his father. Mr. Elridge was dressing in the adjoining rooms, and when Dane heard his door open, a lump of nervousness formed in his chest, but he swallowed it fiercely and called out:

“Oh, dad; come in a minute, won’t you? I want to see you.”

Then he began a diligent search for something in his desk drawer, while his father sauntered in casually enough, settled himself in the big chair by the window, yawned, crossed his knees, stuck his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, and remarked in his agreeable voice:

“Well, I played eighteen holes this morning; you didn’t go out at all, did you?”

Dane’s quick glance had shown him a

quizzical wrinkle at the ends of his father's mouth—indicators always of restrained amusement. "He knows what I want—he thinks it's a huge joke," Dane warned himself.

"No, I didn't go out," he said quietly; "we played tennis a while but it was pretty hot. You know, dad, I admit I made an ass of myself yesterday at breakfast, but on the square, don't you think it's due mother to be a little less—public?"

"Say, what's the matter with you lately?" demanded his father, in an amused but heartily curious voice, "perhaps you've got a form of shell-shock."

Dane, devastating the neat piles of papers like a pointer after a rabbit, continued his search for the unknown, answering the first thing that his father's words brought to his mind, wondering as he spoke, if perhaps they carried truth.

"I guess not; but maybe a week or two

like some of the ones we spent along the Meuse would have made *you* see a few things differently, too."

"In what way?" his father's voice had emptied of amusement.

"In a whole lot of ways, dad." (His quick-given words now led him blindly on.) "They'd have made you realize for one thing, that about the rottenest thing there is, is not to play square with your—your best friends."

"Stop muddling in that drawer!" ordered his father sharply. Dane obediently straightened and faced him, half sitting back on his desk, his hands braced on either side of him. "Just what do you mean by that, you insolent young hound?"

"I mean mother," Dane said, and the simple words seemed to visualize themselves in the air between the two men. As his father stared at him with a slowly growing grin, Dane added, "I think she's about as good a friend as you've got."

In the short silence that followed, his father slowly lighted a cigarette, thoughtfully intent upon the operation. His gray eyes narrowed unpleasantly, but he maintained his disconcerting attitude of parental tolerance for a presumptuous youngster.

"Isn't this ardent concern for your mother rather recent?"

"Yes," said Dane.

There was another uncomfortable pause.

"Go ahead; get it out of your system," encouraged his father with maddening tolerance.

"You know exactly what I mean, dad. I think it's time you cut out this woman—all women, for good."

His father laughed and looked at him, humoringly. Dane felt helplessly chagrined; the situation was merely a travesty of what he had wanted it to be.

"It's a shame to discourage your little

scheme, my boy; but you're not quite a diplomat—yet. I must advise you, in all friendliness, that you're not quite man of the world enough to tackle such big game. Try something simpler for a few years. Too many boys have made fools of themselves over Mrs. Sangster."

Bright red climbed into Dane's high cheek-bones, and quickly receded, leaving the peculiar yellowish white that always companioned his soul-shaking rages; but he controlled himself with an effort so strong that his muscles felt as though they were tearing his body apart. Born of this mastery, an exultant surety invaded him, which found expression in a spontaneous, incredulous laugh at being so oddly admitted to this plane of familiarity with his father.

"Do you mean you think I'm trying to cut you out?" he demanded, reverting in his astonishment to the vernacular of his boyhood.

"I question the good taste of your expression," commented his father with a slightly disconcerted air, as he slowly lifted his fastidiously clothed figure from the chair; "but I can assure you, you'll be wise to take my advice."

"Why, dad," all subtlety deserted Dane in his consciousness of self-control, "why, dad, if I wanted that woman, I wouldn't have to beg her from you; I could get her, to-day—now, anytime. You know it." This was a truth which only bared itself to him at that moment, but he seemed suddenly to have been aware of it for some time. "I—well, I want her about as much as I do smallpox. Good lord, I'm not the only one in the family who isn't a diplomat. All I had to say was, that I think your forcing her down mother's throat is the damned rotten limit. As far as I'm concerned, I'm going to marry Judith Kingston next week."

Not in the slightest did his father's face change from its expression of cynically polite attention. He stood, just as he had straightened up out of his chair, his cigarette poised a few inches from his mouth, and let a slow smile grow on his lips.

"Ah-h-ah, so that's the solution. I see. I see. W-ell, it's only natural you should take to reform, now. I've always expected it'd break out in you some day—being your mother's son. Under the circumstances, I shall overlook your un-called-for remarks, and e-er, congratulate you."

Without further comment he turned and crossed to the door, a little curl of cigarette smoke laughing back over his shoulder.

Dane had not meant to speak of Judith. The words had come of themselves. Under his father's stoical acceptance of them, he felt exactly as he had used to

when he had eagerly displayed some great accomplishment of his childhood only to see it shrivel to insignificance in the eyes of his elders.

"I don't want your congratulations," he muttered after his father's departing back.

"Very well; I withdraw them," said Mr. Elridge in the same determinedly unruffled way, but at the door he turned, to remark with tolerant derision:

"In a little while now, you'll learn that women weren't made to take seriously, every woman is three—what she says and what she thinks and what she does, and none of 'em ever works in unison. Your mother chose just the psychological time, it seems, for taking you into the purity squad. I wondered last night what that pretty little scene meant."

In two scissor strides, Dane reached the door as it was closing, and pinioned his father's arm in five biting fingers.

Thrusting his face close up to the older man's, he spat out fierce but unangered words:

"Now look here, dad, you know damned well and good that mother doesn't know anything about—about what I've said to you. Now don't you—*h-unh?*"

His father's lips thinned into a straight line and his eyes narrowed with their old trick. Into the taut silence of their measuring gaze broke the sound of laughter, the clear pretty laughter of Nathalie Sangster. It stopped sharply, like the sudden unechoing silence of silvery little bells. Dane turned his head, still gripping his father's arm. At the head of the stairway stood Mrs. Sangster with her arm thrown about his mother—two sculptured bits of startled realism.

Another face grew miraculously on his father's shoulders—a serious thoughtful face of a counselor. Mr. Elridge had not turned at sound of the laughter.

Now he shook his head slowly, and uttered words that any onlooker would have taken for a solemn fatherly admonition in the face of heated argument. But what he said was:

“Let go my arm and get back into that room and for God’s sake stay there till you get over this absurd frenzy for melodrama.”

Dane stepped back mechanically and the door closed. He heard his father speaking to the women and heard them laugh. He was still sitting on the straight-backed chair just inside the door, when his mother’s light running knock sounded on the bedroom door. She had gone round by the sleeping porch through his father’s rooms, so that her coming would be unnoticed. She did not wait for a response to her rap, but came directly in and walked quickly to him. There was no pretense about her, now; she was wholly unconscious of herself.

"Dane," she said tensely, "what have you said to your father—what *have* you?"

He got to his feet and put his hands under her elbows. How tiny she was; she reached only to his chest. And that pitiable little fluff of faded hair! But, touched still by his father's ridicule, he resented her forcing herself on him, just then. She seemed to get this resentment, intuitively.

"You don't know—you don't understand how much you mean to your father," she hurried on in explanation; "his love for you is the—the finest thing he has. I can't *bear* to have ill feeling between you. I feel so terribly guilt, so—so—"

"Well, you needn't," he said shortly. "If you must know, we were rowing over that confounded ranch, again. What in the deuce did you think?"

She wilted with relief, a painful red dying her cheeks, and gasped out, rather like a naughty child:

"I—I thought perhaps he hadn't liked your being away all day yesterday with Nathalie."

"Hunh?" His surprise was sincere; he had supposed she had surmised the real state of affairs.

She burst into almost hysterical laughter, and tumbled down into a limp little heap on the couch.

"Oh, it's ridiculous, I know," she confessed with broken breaths, "but he didn't like it; and I was afraid you might have lost your temper and told him—I mean said something—oh, dreadfully unwise."

"Losing the temper is a lost art with me," he declared flamboyantly, secretly embarrassed by the memory of his mother's confidences of the night before, and striving to overcome it. He went into his bedroom, planted himself before the mirror, feet wide-spread, and brushed his already smooth hair vigorously.

"You certainly didn't lose any time get-

ting the camouflage off your hair, did you?" he called back.

"No; but I'd no idea it would look like this. It's terrible, isn't it?"

"W-ell, it looks like it's had a past, all right."

But on the way down-stairs to luncheon he forced himself to say:

"Your hair isn't going to be bad; even the way it is, it makes you look more sort of—motherly." The awkward word stuck in his throat like a thistle burr but he jerked it out valiantly, wondering at the wild flare of pleasure it brought into her face. And as if to reward him for his effort at gentleness, Judith stopped at his side at the foot of the stairs, caught his mother's arm through hers and walked between them to the dining-room.

"You know," she said with her usual candor, "I'm beginning to feel as conscious as if the word 'engaged' were written across my forehead; don't you feel sort of conspicuous, Dane?"

“No; you see it’s written across *my heart*,” he said stiffly.

“Oh, you dear!” appreciated Judith, but in his mother’s surprised eyes, were tears.

Luncheon that day was a very gay affair, almost hilarious. Every one seemed just to have emerged from a mental bath, glowing with the best of spirits. Even staid Keith Newland unbent into such remarkable gaiety that he threw a buttered muffin across the table at Mrs. Lawson in return for one of her sharp speeches. Dane had never felt such exuberant ease of spirit; it melted his reticence and self-consciousness completely away, even toward his father. He found himself exchanging anecdotes with Bill Newland, and arguing about tractors with Judith’s uncle. And then he began telling them about the French aviator who had entertained them at dinner the night before, his face alight with a warm enthusiasm

that seldom visited it. In the course of the talk that followed, all of the events of the preceding afternoon were covered,—the luncheon, their dinner at the hotel, the dancing afterward. Mrs. Sangster related most of it, with several laughing allusions to Dane's eagerness to be rid of her. Her recital embarrassed Dane exceedingly because of his father, whose eyes he was careful to avoid, and he wondered at the queer smile which teased the corners of Judith's mouth.

He only looked at Mrs. Sangster once or twice; now that he had avowed the truth not only to himself but to his father, her calm sure gaze was extremely disquieting. To evade these personal pitfalls, he affected a new and flattering interest in his mother's wavering little discourse at the other end of the table. Nothing that his mother said ever possessed both an end and a beginning. She was talking now, in her patchy fashion, about the color

harmonies and discords that were evolving as a result of the war; her remarks gathering unity by means of a quietly inserted word here and there from Keith Newland. Dane tried to get some definite idea of what she meant, but failed; it was no great wonder, he thought, that she should irritate his extremely practical father; he couldn't imagine Judith chattering away like that.

He began to wonder what his mother was really like under her veneer of individuality.

After luncheon he found himself being engineered into a corner by Mrs. Lawson, and speculated uncomfortably as to what was in store for him. He had a keen desire to keep that forceful lady in as amiable a mood as possible toward him. Mrs. Lawson was always prompt in getting to the point.

"Dane," she said abruptly, "I haven't seen your mother look so happy in fifteen

years and I think you're at the bottom of it. I don't know what's come over you, I'm sure, but whatever it is, it's an exceedingly pleasant change and I hope to heaven it continues."

"Very nice of you, I'm sure," said Dane stiffly, startled into a semblance of his usual manner.

"Now don't try to squelch *me*, you young wretch; I've spanked you many a time and I'm quite capable of doing it still." She laughed comfortably into his disgruntled face, giving his arm a hearty squeeze, the nearest approach to affection she had shown him since he was a little chap. "I'm so glad you're beginning to act like a human being to your mother that I declare I feel quite fond of you. I think I'll make you something. Could you use a dark heavy sweater out on the ranch?"

Dane, who loathed sweaters, accepted eagerly.

"I sure could, all right. Why, I'm awfully obliged, Aunt Lawson."—Wouldn't Judith like to hear about this? His world was certainly beginning to swing in a joyous orbit.

He found Judith in a breeze cooled corner of the east porch, sitting back in the hammock, doing nothing. That in itself was unusual, and her eyes betrayed traces of very recent tears.

"Why, sweetheart, what's the matter?" Having kissed a pair of unwelcoming lips, he plumped himself down on a cushion at her feet, putting his hand over the toe of one of her white shoes.

"Dane, there's just no use thinking about being married next week. I can *not* make myself feel sure it's the right thing to do."

He had been so emotionally fatigued the last few days that he did not sense this fully.

"*Wh-at?*"

"I don't really trust you, Dane; I've tried to make myself, but I can't."

"You're not serious, Judith?" his voice was thick with incredulity.

"I am, I am. Oh, Dane how *could* you?"

His keenest sensation was exasperation.

"My God! How could I what?"

"Not tell me."

"Not tell you *what*?"

"About yesterday, about all the things you've just been talking about at luncheon. Why didn't you tell me this morning when we—we pledged ourselves always to tell each other the truth. You knew I thought you were kept in town yesterday with your old machinery and windmills and things. Why didn't you tell me you just stayed because that woman wanted you to?"

He rocked back on the cushion, embracing his knees; his face so wholly astounding that Judith's eyes softened a trifle.

He was surprised to find that the explanations he started so confidently to give should sound, even to his own ears, startlingly inadequate.

"Why, there wasn't anything to tell, Judith; there wasn't any secret about it; the lord knows I wanted to come home but she—I mean things just kept on happening to keep us."

"Yes," said Judith, that ring of ominous prejudice in her bitter young voice, "she wanted to stay so you stayed; it didn't make any difference that you'd promised me to come out early. But why didn't you tell me you were with her?"

They argued an hour; repeating and repeating the same absurd accusations and futile answers.

"I didn't think of it at all," he kept telling her, "I only saw you that little while and I was thinking about *us*. Oh, Judith, you know it!"

And she reiterated until his ears rang with it:

"But you could have come home, you could have; it's only a little thing, it seems silly, I know, but if a pretty woman makes you forget the little things, now, what will it be after while? No, I've got to have longer to decide."

At the end of an hour he got to his feet. He knew the pain of it was yet to come; now he felt only chilled and numb. Resolve slowly strengthened him.

"No, we won't take any longer to decide," he told her quietly. "With all dad's done to—to hurt her, mother's got twice as much trust in him even now as you have in me. I've told you I can't wait for you and I mean it. I'm not going to torture myself like this for any three months, and then have you get another absurd reason to wait longer. If you loved me the way I do you, you wouldn't be wanting to wait any more than I do. You're either going to marry me next week or not at all. Now I mean it, Judith, I mean it."

He did not know he was pleading with her; his intention was to be stern and commanding.

"Then it's not at all, Dane," she answered instantly.

"Oh, Judith, you *can't* mean it."

"Why, Dane, a few months will soon pass; maybe, maybe Aunt Ellen would bring me out to the ranch for a visit. But I must be certain. I'd never be happy going into anything the way I feel now. Don't be so silly and tragic about it."

He was stupefied at the littleness of her understanding of him.

"It's not at all, then, is it? Well, *I'm through with you.*"

He strode down the porch, ignoring her softly called, "Oh, Dane, don't be such a goose, come back here." At the door he turned and said:

"Is it next week, then?" Something in his voice startled her smile away, but she shook her head slowly.

On his swift way to his rooms he met Mrs. Sangster coming down the stairs with her hands full of gray yarn. Her eyes, deep and blue and questioning, swept his white pained face, but thank God, she did not speak to him—she only smiled. He stumbled on into his room and flung himself full length on his bed.

For two hours he lay there, trying to convince himself that he would stick to what he had said. He argued logically that Judith was petty and unjust and narrow-minded; he reminded himself that his love had swallowed up all his interest in the great ranch, a responsibility he owed it to himself to meet successfully. But the lure of his day-dreams refused to be banished. He had woven Judith into every thought of his future—until it now seemed that all the other things were merely incidental threads he had woven about Judith. The ranch had come to mean only the interim between her visits

to him and his trips to New York, for he knew she would never be contented living in the West. They had not even had time to discuss it. He had even pictured himself riding the ten miles to the post-office every day for her letters—he had seen himself being handed the big square envelopes addressed in her generous girlish scrawl. Somehow, the letters seemed to be the last straw. *He could never give her up!*

Perhaps the ranch and its big problems would ease his waiting for her; the idea was logical and comforting. Of course he would wait for her, just as she had known he would. How well she knew her power over him.

He got wearily from the bed; his eyes smarted and he was damp and crumpled from the heat. But after a cold shower and fresh linen he felt a new man, eager to find Judith and begin the pleasant mending of their quarrel. His watch

amazed him with its rapid covering of time; he wondered what Judith had been doing those three hours.

Before going down-stairs he flung open the east curtains to let the breeze through the warm room. The wide windows looked down into a sheltered pergola covered with blossoming brier roses, and there, as though the Fates had ordered the stage set for his eyes alone, stood Judith and Bill Newland. Newland's arm was closely about her but Dane could not see his face. It was Judith's upturned face he saw, her strong serene young face, waiting for Newland's kiss,—inviting it.

Paralyzed by the shock of it, Dane stood with sharply indrawn breath through epochs of agony while the young major's head bent slowly lower and Judith's face was hidden.

Again the world emptied of all worth of living, but this time irrevocably, with no gates left open for hope's returning.

Dane sat down on the edge of the bed, trembling, his mind a wallow of misery through which his father's mocking words kept darting like serpent tongues,—“In a little while you'll learn that women weren't made to take seriously....not made to take seriously....not to take seriously....”

“Shut up,” he whined out as if to an audible voice.

Bending his head into his coldly moist hands he mumbled broken bits of pity to himself, “Oh, God, what'll I do now?.... I can't stand it.... I tell you I can't stand it....it's too damned hard....too damned hard....”

The slow realization of his whining voice finally shamed him into silence.

“This is a hell of a way to act,” he told himself disgustedly, meeting his face in the mirror with a twisted grin. “I'm certainly hard hit all right,” he thought grimly. “My God, what a week!”

Something about his drawn face made him think of his mother.

“It’s no wonder she’s a queer little nut,” he muttered aloud, and unconsciously, in that time that he sat there, trying to gather up the shreds of his shrinking will power, he came very close in understanding to his little falsely gay mother.

He decided that he would tell his mother, and then quietly take his roadster and run into New York without seeing any one. The instant the thought struck him he started from the room; his mother would be on the south lawn, sketching.

Yes, there she was, in her ridiculous hat and apron, painting her *Serenity*. Her easel depicted it exactly as it existed in their family, thought Dane, an upheaval of color as dizzying as a rough sea. When he got near enough for her to see his face she stood up, startled, stretching out both her hands; calling to

him in a tender mothering voice she had been so long cheated of using:

“Oh, honey, what is it?”

He took her hands tight in his and told her.

“Mother, it’s all up between Judith and me. I’m going in town till she leaves, I’ll get ready to go west.”

She stared up at him, catching her lips in and out of her teeth, her eyes reflecting the pain in his own. Then she said tensely:

“Oh, Dane, there’s a mistake, somewhere. Judith loves you.”

He laughed. She shrank, hearing it.

“Yes, she loves me!” he sneered. “I’ll leave a note on my desk; I wish you’d give it to her. Good-by.”

She clung to his hands.

“You couldn’t tell me, dear?” she urged timidly.

“No,” he said shortly. “Not now, I can’t. Only, well—I wish you wouldn’t

talk me over with her if you don't mind. Don't try to fix it. Don't discuss it. And say, I'll be at the club—no, I won't either, don't want to see anybody; I'll go to the McAlpin. Phone me there when this mob's cleared out, will you?"

"Oh yes, yes, dear. Oh, I—I know I can't help you but—"

"But you would if you could," he interrupted a little sharply. "I know you would. But I've got to swallow this by myself."

He gave a wild burst of laughter. "Love plays the devil with you and me, doesn't he; but cheer-oh, we'll best him yet."

He kissed her roughly and rushed off, vaguely conscious of her repeating in a distressed voice, something about being certain there was a mistake, somewhere.

Back in his rooms he wrote Judith a short note while a servant put his things in a bag. He did not hesitate over it.

“Judith:

“Just having seen you in the pergola with Bill, I realize you are not crushed with the pain of throwing me over. I hope you’ll get as much kick out of poor old Bill as you have out of torturing me, you little ———, fill that in yourself; *you* know what you are.

“Dane.”

When he went out for his car, he looked out over the lawn toward his mother. She was sitting on the stool before her easel, limp shouldered, her hands in her lap. She looked like a wilted toadstool. Dane’s throat choked. He ran lightly across the grass, startling her into a little cry when he landed at her side and bent over her, smothering her, hat and all, in his rough arms.

“Cheer-oh! little old mother,” he muttered quickly, and ran on toward the garages, his heart a little less heavy for having left that healing tenderness in her eyes.

CHAPTER IX

BURNING HIS BRIDGES

AT the McAlpin Dane found a certain seclusion among all the strange indifferent faces. He had never cared about people; had never taken any enjoyment watching them; had never felt the least curiosity about their lives, or what they thought or said or did. But to-night lounging morosely in a lobby chair, he let each stranger drift across his consciousness with some speculation as to where he lived, or whom he loved, or who his companion was, or whom he might be deceiving. He saw something of Judith or his mother or Mrs. Sangster in every woman who passed. But in very few of the men did he find the ironical unsympathetic type of his father.

In spite of his efforts, he could not tire his mind; it swept back to Judith with merciless insistence. He spent a miserable night tossing about and dreaming restlessly. Once he dreamed of having Judith in his arms, but just as his dream rose to heart-breaking ecstasy, the lips that answered his were Mrs. Sangster's, and he woke with the fragrance of her pale golden hair in his nostrils. He got up then and sat by the window until morning, smoking countless cigarettes. His thoughts strayed undirected to Mrs. Sangster, only making his pain the sharper when they returned to disillusioned reality.

And he thought of his mother; she too was probably lying awake, wondering about him. The thought brought him a certain comfort for it filled his tortured heart with a sympathy that was in itself, healing. Oddly enough, he felt no bitterness against young Newland, and no

hatred against Judith. His mind cast aside every emotion but the pain of Judith's not loving him.

He remembered what his mother had said about the helplessness of a great love.

"God, I wish I could cry," he muttered once, feeling that tears might ease the burning in his brain.

He went early to breakfast. "At least I can eat," he told himself with grim humor. His hunger seemed almost insatiable.

After breakfast he wrote notes to Judith for two hours, well knowing that he would destroy them all, but he wrote at least a dozen—bitter ones, insulting ones, and dignifiedly magnanimous ones. It helped him gather courage against his pain to put his thoughts on paper, to see in black and white the exact extent of her frailty. Then he burnt them all in the bathtub, making a nasty mess of it; but destroying at the same time all the cour-

age he had gained in writing them. It was no use—he wanted Judith—wanted her—*wanted her!* And the picture of her upturned face waiting for Newland's kiss would not veil itself from his vision.

A boy brought him a note from his mother. She must have sent Thomas down to the late train to mail it. She was a good little scout. It told him that the Lawsons and Judith were going to their Long Island house that afternoon, that young Newland was going to the Whitelaws' for the rest of his furlough, and that his father was driving Mrs. Sangster in to her town apartment that morning. "I just told them, dear," she wrote, "that some western men you knew in France were at the McAlpin and telephoned you, and you didn't want to miss seeing them. Your father told me you had mentioned your engagement, so I merely said I thought you had broken it off for a little while. We didn't discuss it. Ju-

dith said very little; I'll tell you about it when you come. But I'm sure, dear, it will all be all right. I'm praying that it will with all my heart. Bless you, dear. Mother."

He was standing there with the note still opened in his hands, when the telephone rang sharply. Unaccountable emotion surged over him as Mrs. Sangster's cool fresh voice soothed his ears.

"Hello; it's time you got up. Come out and feed me something cold."

"Where's dad? Can't he find you a mint julep?"

"He's busy. Besides, you are the only man I know whose coldness never, never melts." Her laugh was like the fragrance in her hair, teasing, alluring.

"W-ell, I oughtn't to waste the time but—; where'll you be?"

"Brute! I'm here at the Waldorf so I'll wait in the alley. Don't be cross, though, it's so hot!"

He hung up, stretched himself carelessly with the feeling that curious eyes were watching him, and walked about the room, cutting off a tiny tendril of consciousness which was whispering, "You're glad she's here—you're glad," by the gruff admission, "Well, I've got to do something to get out of this muck."

Walking up Thirty-fourth Street, he found himself wondering how she would be dressed and how she would look. It was pleasant to put Judith even so little aside.

Mrs. Sangster was as lovely as always, dressed in the coolest of light green organdy. She actually looked so much like a flower that he had all he could do to keep from being an ass and telling her so.

"What a satisfactory party it must have been to make you look like this," she marveled, her cool hand leaving his, lingeringly. "Why, my dear man, you look the very *ghost* of dissipation."

His lips thinned into a wry grin.

"I'll say it was some party." The scent of her hair recalled his dream. It embarrassed him. "I'd a note from mother," he plunged ahead hastily, something he could not control impelling him to ask: "Did Bill and Judith come in with you?"

"Oh, that Judith," she laughed, taking his arm, her face lighted with the pleasure of fresh gossip. "I think she and Billy must have had a fearful row last evening—you know Judith's really a dreadful flirt; I'm sure she broke a dozen hearts last winter. Now I guess it's Billy's turn. Anyhow, he looked as badly as you do this morning and suddenly discovered that he'd promised to visit the Whitelaws. But he recovered a little after breakfast—men will, you know; and Judith was really awfully sweet to him. So perhaps they made it up. Lover's quarrels, awful—aren't they?"

His heart gave a sickening thud of assent.

"How in the deuce should I know?"

"Well, you'll know some day, you cynic," she replied ominously.

His mind was so twisted over the puzzle of Judith and Bill that he blindly ignored this.

"Where—where are we going?" he stammered.

"First for ice-cream—gobs of it; and then for a green parasol."

Her mood embraced him. There was laughter under everything she said, and in some intangible way she made him feel *older* than did any one else, a person of consequence.

They had ice-cream at Henri's, and they bought a light green parasol of his choosing after exploring a half-dozen ultra little shops, and they strolled idly through a gallery of etchings they happened to be passing. Mrs. Sangster guided their conversation into channels

far removed from personalities. He was surprised at her reach of knowledge and willingly entertained by her skilfully told reminiscences of foreign cities and people she had known abroad. There was always a pleasant vein of self-directed humor under her chatter.

They took a victoria and while they were jogging slowly along in the fairly comfortable traffic, she said idly:

“We’re going to have luncheon together, aren’t we?”

“I hadn’t thought of it; but I’ll take you, if you like. Isn’t your appetite a little abnormal?”

“I adore to eat,” she confessed, laughing, “and it’s nicer to talk with nice cool iced food in front of you. I want so to hear about your ranch—all about it; I never really have, you know. The West fascinates me; if I weren’t a coward I’d buy a little tiny ranch myself. I know you’ve been wondering why I seem determined to kidnap you, haven’t you?”

“Oh, I don’t know; I realize I’m an unusually attractive fellow.”

“Well, you’re not, you conceited thing. It’s because you want to go way out there and get right into the bigness and roughness of things and actually be a part of it, instead of spending your life in a little steam-heated hole called an office.”

Her words called up a quick response; he saw great brown hills and cotton-wooded creeks and long, long roads, in a sudden panoramic vision. Something like excitement thrilled him. Oh, if he could only have taken Judith out there!

“Where do the cattle drink way out in those dry hills?” she was asking.

He brought himself back with a jerk; she must have been talking a long time, unheard.

“Oh, there are springs and water-holes. But that’s what I want to do. I’ve got a wonderful natural reservoir on my land and I’m going to put a dam—”

With such a flattering listener he could not help but talk. All through luncheon he kept on talking, led fleetingly by her apt questions. And when he left her it was with the promise to have dinner with her that night at her apartment on lower Riverside Drive. He was so filled with enthusiasm that he spent all the hot afternoon in a wholesale house looking at wire fencings.

But back at the hotel dressing for dinner he began dreading to see her again. So subtle was her aberration from the realms of social discretion that he was constantly aware of the extreme delicacy of the situation, and fearful lest she detect his youthful perplexity.

He was walking in new paths, wholly untutored in their subtleties, not knowing just what pace to strike with this beautiful woman.

But, weakened with his desire and longing for Judith, it was with a certain eager-

ness—a hunger for forgetfulness, that he entered her small charming apartment.

Clarissa, the blackest woman he had ever seen, served them a dinner that was in itself oblivion of all things else, though he found himself frequently picturing his father sitting where he sat, listening to that same soft pretty laughter.

After dinner, lying comfortably stretched out on the great blue tufted divan, Dane swore to himself that he should certainly kiss her that night...perhaps...

But still, it was only his eyes and tongue that dared make bold. It amused him to feel that his apparent indifference piqued her, but each time that the tantalizing question in her blue eyes almost goaded him into obeying his quickened pulses, some unwelcome thought of Judith intruded itself and held him silent, often awkwardly so. She sat in a low chair, facing him; her quick beautiful hands busy with gray knitting that she

told him was to be a sweater for him to wear on the ranch. Her clothes were always as much a part of her as the petals of a blossom, and to-night seemed unusually so. She wore a dress of palest pink chiffon, untrimmed but for the drooping fragrant roses at her belt. He had wanted to touch her all the evening, but it was as though one single hypnotic thread failed to vibrate before the magnet of her charm. They had been silent for a little while, his eyes bold with pleasure of looking upon her. He thought of what she had told him about her baby dying.

“Say, on the square, *have* you had a baby?” he blurted out.

“*What?* Why—why, yes, of course. What on earth brought that into your queer head?”

“Oh, I don’t know; you don’t look the part, somehow. What was its name?”

“Nathalie,” she said shortly, after a

tiny pause as if she had considered sparing with him.

“O-oh, a girl.”

“Yes.”

“I wonder,” he sent little rings of smoke curling upward like lazy pictures of his reflections, “I wonder what you’d be like if she hadn’t died.”

“Let’s wonder about something else—please,” she said gently. “You’ll have to put up with me the way I am. Why speculate on the impossible?”

“Oh, I just thought that since you seem to have taken such a fancy to me, I’d like to know a little more about you.”

Her laughter was genuine. He found it impossible either to irritate or disconcert her.

“The excellence of your conceit demands respect; all men are conceited of course, but you are absolutely a genius.”

“Inherited, you see. I get it from dad. It’s going to be the worst jolt dad’s ever

had, when he realizes I've cut him out with you."

"I think," she said, suddenly serious, her voice rather more wistful than pained, "I think you really misunderstand the friendship between your father and me."

"Aw, why do you do it?" he drawled rudely. "You know you don't fool me. What's the use?"

Slowly she raised her eyes, those blue beautiful eyes so deep with their knowledge of men. He felt as though she were fathoming the depths of his untutored youthfulness with her unwavering gaze, but he did not flinch from it.

"Are you then,—so stupid? It is more than two years and a half now, that your father has been,—w-ell, quite frankly, interested in me. Knowing him, do you not think that is rather a long time for attainment to endure?"

Hot blood burnt his cheeks, his throat, his forehead. The woman was telling him

the truth. Still watching him with careful eyes, her voice took on a tone that came oddly from that scarlet luring mouth.

"Your mother is the only woman I know who does not hate me. She will probably never know it but—I have never betrayed her friendship."

Dane whipped himself feverishly from a bog of sentiment that threatened alarmingly to suck him down into the ruin of actual tears, and said with an insolent manner of unbelief:

"Being her son then, I take it I'm fairly safe."

"The way you hate me is positively fascinating," she said wonderingly.

He grinned, and reconnoitered.

"If you knew what I'm thinking right now, you'd not be so sure I hate you."

"Yes, I should too. But you've got to get over it, young man. I can't have people I like, hating me." She dismissed

personalities by going to the piano and playing, with a careless charm, for perhaps half an hour. Then when she came back to her knitting, he found that she was soon listening in her luring way, to his tireless discourses on irrigation, reservoirs and alfalfa possibilities. After a time she held up the sweater and surveyed it approvingly.

“Now get up and try this on. I want to see about the sleeves.”

He stood up obediently and took off his coat.

“I’ve got a box of these things, already, you know.”

“Yes, beast. But this is the one you’ll wear because it’s the best, now isn’t it?”

“It looks pretty fair,” he conceded stingily, and bending over, let her slip it over his head. Then, as she stood in front of him, patting and pulling it into place, he kissed her. It was an exceedingly simple matter. He just dropped his arms

about her and let his lips lie long against the side of her soft throat, the tantalizing fragrance of her hair sweet in his nostrils. He closed his eyes and tried to let the pleasure of his senses take full sway of him, but that same insistent memory, that thin stinging contrast with love's ecstasy of passion, was too strong.

He straightened with a jerk, feeling horribly uncouth in the situation, his face furiously flushed.

"First kiss from the enemy," she murmured whimsically, "not a success." In spite of himself, he laughed, and she went on unconcernedly examining the fit of the sweater. He did not kiss her again; the dulling of his quick passion left too deep a longing for Judith. He had allowed himself to dream of Judith with such surety that now his cheated love rebelled against the comfort of bare passion.

He peeled the sweater off and handed it to her, getting hastily into his coat.

"I've got to go now," he said stiffly.

"Y-es? It isn't late." Her manner was careless but her eyes were keen.

"I know it isn't, but I'm dog tired and I've got an early date in the morning."

She came and stood close to him, laying her hand lightly on his arm.

"I know something has hurt you. I wish I could help," she said.

Her voice was so sweet that acute fear clutched him lest he should blurt everything out and perhaps weep on her snowy shoulder. She seemed, without moving, to be coming closer to him. He stared into her eyes, fascinated.

"You want to like me; what is it?" she urged.

"I do like you," he blurted, emphatic with the startling truth of it.

He yielded to the command in her eyes as one sinks from troubled wakefulness into excited dreaming, and took her madly into his hungry young arms. Bending

her head back roughly to kiss her lips, his eyes burned for a swift instant into her half closed ones. Just so, in such another moment, he had looked into Judith's eyes on that day before they quarreled. And in their shy unafraid brown depths had been a blinding light whose memory made the thing he saw in this woman's triumphant drowsy gaze, quickly and keenly revolting to him. *With staggering realization he remembered that Judith's face had been empty of that light when he had seen her waiting for Newland's kiss.* Trust, overpowering, inexplicable, rushed over him. Judith loved him; in some queer way she had not been false to him. Swept so suddenly and violently clean of his desire for the woman in his arms, he almost dropped her, so that she stumbled back, her eyes lit sharply with angered surprise. He stared at her, open lipped, filled with a dumb sick wonder of himself. Then, at the absolute stupefaction

that dulled her beautiful face, he broke into hoarse unpleasant laughter.

“Second kiss by the enemy—utter failure,” he grated out, throwing his arms wide in a meaningless gesture. “I guess this better be our last encounter, Nathalie. Ha, ha! *Nathalie!*”

He drawled her name derisively. The sound of his coarse jeering tones brought him to himself with a violent start.

“I’m sorry,” he said very gravely. “Really I am, for I do like you. Good night.”

Turning, he walked slowly out of the room, acutely glad that she did not speak. He took his hat from the inscrutable Yvette, and forgetting that elevators existed, he walked down the four flights of stairs.

The fresh cool air that whipped into his car as he drove swiftly away down Riverside Drive was to his hot body what the quiet decision that had come to him was

to his mind. He would wait forever for Judith; he could not go on without at least the hope of someday having her. That he had seen her in Newland's arms meant nothing now; his sudden unquestioning trust thrust aside even the knowledge of his vision.

At the hotel he found a special delivery letter from her, written from their Long Island house, and opened it with fingers that acted like splintered sticks. He sat down on one of the onyx benches in the middle of the lobby, stupefied with a sort of estatic relief which blinded him for several minutes from reading the letter.

"Dane dearest, that was a very nasty note of yours, wasn't it? I firmly intended never to forgive you for it, but—you see. Now that I've thought it over, I can see how much more reason you have, than I did, to think wrongly.

"But when you saw Billy and me (heaven knows how) I must just have been telling him that I loved you! Was it so very dreadful to let him kiss me

good-by? I would have told you all about it, just as I did tell you about us, the other day.

"But I've been thinking and thinking how horribly you must be feeling, for I know how miserable I was silly enough to feel about Mrs. Sangster. Even if she is as old as Methuselah, I just know she likes you; I used to watch her, and, you blessed infant, I'm sure I know her heaps better than you do. I couldn't bear it, that she should influence you more than I did in anything. But I'll spend years in sack-cloth and ashes for being such an idiot.

"Telephone me when you get this; what are you doing at that hotel, anyway? You understand, don't you, that I don't want any more time to think about anything. I love you, and I couldn't be so humble if I weren't sure you love me.

"Judith."

After eternities of wasted time, he got the Lawson house on the telephone. When Judith's voice came over the wires, soft and deep—a little throaty as though she had been crying—it made him tremble violently.

"Judith?" he said hoarsely; "that—this you, Judith?"

"Yes."

"I got your note."

"Yes," she said.

"I—I just got it."

"Yes," she said again. "Where are you?"

"At the hotel."

"I tried to get you there about dinner time. Did you have dinner with your western friends?"

He grew flamingly hot; the truth seemed horribly out of all proportion.

"Yes," he said, terrified by the short silence that followed.

"When do they leave?"

"They've gone. You—you sound queer, Judith."

"W-ell," her voice broke a little, "I've had a queer day. What did you do all day?"

"Did the best I could to keep from go-

ing mad....chased around and looked at fencing and machinery and windmills.... don't even know what I bought....I'd made up my mind I'd beat it west this week....Oh, Judith, you've no idea, I've simply gone through hell....it's early, can't I drive out?"

"N-o, it's nearly eleven; why didn't you think of it sooner?"

"Why—why, dear, I just got your note, I just got in. You know how it is, Judith. I hadn't seen these chaps since we played mud pies along the Marne; I couldn't very well break away from 'em sooner. I can be out there in half an hour."

It was more with the subconscious desire to thrust Mrs. Sangster conclusively out of his past, present and future, than with an ulterior motive of deceit, that he developed this unfortunate fiction. But in the singing awfulness that filled the ensuing silence, he knew, before Judith spoke, that he had burned his bridges.

"I just telephoned Mrs. Sangster a few minutes ago," Judith finally said, her words precisely acute, "to tell her that Marie had stupidly packed her tennis things with ours. She told me what a jolly time you had this morning, *and* at luncheon, *and*—at dinner. There—there isn't anything more to say, I think."

While she talked his body had been released from ravages of fire and claimed by a frozen numbness. He began stammering that he could explain everythingthat it was nothing, nothingthat she knew it was nothingfor God's sake not to make any more trouble out of nothing

"That is just it, Dane," cut in her mercilessly resolute voice, "our ideas of 'nothing' are not the same. You can not make any possible explanation to me. You see that what I was afraid of, is true, and I prefer to take my medicine now, all at once, rather than to have a life-long bottle

of it. I don't want to see you, nor to hear from you. You told me yesterday you were 'through with me.' Now, I am 'through with you,' and when *I* am through, it is for always. Good-by."

It was perhaps half an hour after this, that Dane, who had been driving aimlessly about the sleepy streets, finally stopped again at an apartment on Riverside Drive. The old French maid, Yvette, whose face held a secret in every myriad wrinkle, admitted him and left him in the drawing-room which was still reminiscent of his cigarettes.

Mrs. Sangster came out immediately, in a white chiffon robe out of which her shoulders rose as delicately pink as azaleas. There was a very real solicitude on her lovely face and her voice was tender with sympathy.

"I knew you were troubled," she said quite simply; "I'll be an awfully kind enemy if you'll only let me."

He went quickly toward her. There was no barrier before his desire for her, now. He wanted nothing but the forgetfulness which she could give him. She came into his arms as lightly as a breeze-blown thistle-down, with a little murmur of sympathy soft as a low song, her lips barely touched his, seeming just to draw away, yet lingering. Very slowly his embrace tightened, crushing her body close against his own as he watched her face flush in reflection of the flame in his own, then with low broken laughter, his lips found the fragrant flesh where her gossamer gown slipped away.

CHAPTER X

THE TRINKET

It was late afternoon of the next day when he drove up to the great white country house that sprawled so comfortably along the hilltop and peered, like a complacent old man over his newspaper, down over fields of tree-tops at the Hudson River. His mother came down the steps to meet him and the welcome in her face was so pleasant to him that he thought with surprise, "Why, how pretty she looks." She wore a simply cut gown of pale yellow that brought out golden lights in her deeply dark eyes, the girdle caught together with a few bright nasturtiums, and her hair was surprisingly gray, making her slender face seem a little less pale.

He kissed her with a slight air of self-consciousness.

"Well, the hair's coming on, isn't it?"

"Oh! Why, yes. I get five years older every time Jennie shampoos it. How—how are you, dear?"

"Why, I'm all right—little tired."

His grin made her eyes fill with tears. She stopped in the pebbled path at the foot of the steps, her eyes loving and sorrowing over him.

"Isn't it going to be all right, dear?"

"Sure it is. She's saved from a profligate husband and I'm saved from a suspicious wife."

"Sh, dear. Keith's here working on his government reports."

"Oh, damn!" With difficulty he swallowed further expressions of resentment, and they went up the steps silently; he hadn't realized that he wanted his mother to himself; it was so entirely a new sensation.

Tall, quiet-faced Keith Newland with his slightly stooped shoulders and thin red hair came forward out of a shadowy corner of the porch, his hands in the pockets of his loose coat.

"Hello, Dane," he said quietly.

"Gosh, how he hates me," flashed Dane's intuition — another thing he seemed always to have known and never to have thought of before. Looking at the dignified scholarly man with eyes sharpened by new values, he saw a keen dislike in his eyes. Newland had evidently overheard his last explosive words and thought them uttered in some irritation at his mother.

"Hello," said Dane shortly, and with a sort of grim amusement as if to challenge the older man's antagonistic air of protection over his mother, he threw his arm about her shoulders and gave her a quick awkward hug.

"Dad home?" he asked.

“No, he’s driving out late; those oil men from Texas are here.”

“Then send Tom up with some eats for me about seven, will you, mother? I’ll let you two have an agreeable dinner,” and he strode on into the house, torn strangely between a desire to knock Keith Newland off the porch, and a feeling of new liking for the man.

After dark he sneaked out of a side door for a walk, hoping that if he tired his body sufficiently he might sleep. He tried running, and jumping hedges, but his body scorned weariness, and his brain only pounded on in its rut of misery. He wished he had stayed in town where at least temporary forgetfulness lay, but now, when he thought of Mrs. Sangster it was as an experience rather than a personality.

Finally he came back to the house and stretched himself out in one of the porch hammocks just outside the open library

windows. A mist had rolled up from the river and its damp cool touch was pleasant to him, but it drove his mother and Keith Newland in from the front veranda to the library. At first their words meant nothing to him, but, hearing Judith's name, his ears helplessly listened.

"Judith's lots like Ellen," Keith Newland was saying, "it takes her a long time to make up her mind but when she does, she never changes it. No, I'm afraid Billy's lost out for good."

"Billy didn't tell you about it, then?" Mrs. Elridge asked.

"Well, no. I didn't bother him about it. I could see he was pretty well cut up. He just said he'd go over to the Whites' and get her out of his mind as best he could. God knows I'm sorry for the boy."

Dane heard the click of his mother's knitting needles. He knew now without any doubt that Keith Newland loved his

mother. He knew it by the way he said those last words. There was a little silence. His mother broke it to ask irrelevantly:

“Keith, did Dane look badly to you this afternoon?”

“Now that I think of it, he did look a bit seedy. I imagine it’s nothing to worry about, Jane; a little too good a time with his friends, probably.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, I know,” she said quickly, “I just wondered if I imagined it. I’m always expecting some horrible effect from his wounds.”

“I doubt if they’ll ever bother him; he looks a healthy young animal enough. He seems to have changed somewhat.”

“Yes, I think so,” she agreed absently. Her voice had lost its false coating as of intense interest in whatever was being said. Dane sensed in it the same quality of familiar trust and confidence that had been so wonderfully sweet to him in Ju-

dith's voice; it made him think, miserably, of what Judith had said about every one having some one person to whom they were wholly and entirely honest.

"You know, Dane has seemed more like you to me this time, Jane, than he ever has before," Newland said musingly.

"Oh." Her queer little gasp made Dane's face feel hot. "Oh, do you think so, Keith? I'm afraid he wouldn't like very well to think so, himself. Do you remember how his baby game was always 'playing I'm father'?"

"Yes."

"He's never stopped playing it," she said with an unsure little laugh, "until just lately. Now he's beginning to be—himself."

"That's good," said Newland in a constrained voice.

"Not that there aren't many traits of John's that I want him always to keep," she added in quick loyalty.

“Oh, of course; certainly.”

After a little time in which Dane heard newspapers rustling, Newland spoke again in a quiet unemotional voice.

“There isn’t anything you want to talk over with me, is there, Jane?”

“Oh, thank you, Keith. I couldn’t begin, somehow. I was sure you felt I wanted to talk to you, though. Oh, Keith, it’s never been so long, before.”

A great vicarious yearning to understand the tangle of his mother’s life, a desire utterly alien to curiosity, held Dane tensely listening.

“How long?” asked Newland gently.

“Over two years.”

“Y-es?”

His faintly surprised, reflective question seemed to open the flood gates of her heart; she poured out her words in a voice so scourged with pain that Dane’s own trouble fled before the sound of it.

“I can’t be sure it’s like the others,

Keith—just infatuation....she is so lovely....I....can't bear it very much longer.....he's *talked* to me about her...., he says he feels she needs our friendship....she's touched him more deeply than any one else ever has....Oh, Keith, I am so tired of everything."

"Don't, dear, *don't* let it hurt you so," said Newland gently, his voice infinitely distressed, "I'm sure it isn't so—so.... oh, my God, Jane, how *can* you go on loving him?"

"I don't know, Keith," her voice was quietly empty again, "just the same reason that you go on loving me, I guess. I suppose it sounds ridiculous, but he does depend on me for—for a good deal," she finished lamely as if ashamed of so boasting.

"Of course he does." The man's tones were again matter-of-fact and reassuring. "I think you made a mistake asking her out here, Jane. How did you happen to?"

“Oh, I can’t really tell you. I didn’t want to seem to avoid her to—to John, and every one has her when—well, when it’s necessary. I think I almost hoped *you’d* be attracted to her,” her words ended in a little shattered burst of laughter.

“My God, Jane, I loathe her. I want to choke the woman every instant she’s near me. I *can* not see why society tolerates her—her sort. She’s twice as contemptible as if she had a license.”

“W-ell, that isn’t very just, Keith. I don’t know but what there’s more reason for a man to respect his wife’s dignity than for a strange woman to. I often—”

“I wasn’t arguing for your husband,” Newland inserted stiffly; “I’ve always thought you preferred me not to mention my ideas about him.”

“I often remind myself,” she went on as if she had not heard his interruption, “that if I had been the right wife

for John he wouldn't have needed any one else. The first two years we were married I don't think he even knew there was another woman in the world." There was a pitiable pride in the words.

Newland said nothing. After a time she continued, more to herself than to him:

"How queer it all is; you have never given me anything but happiness; if I needed help I should go to you; and still—"

"Yes," he assented dryly, accepting her thought as it hung unfinished in the air, —"and still, here we are. Have you actually considered a divorce, Jane?" He put the question cautiously, his tone expectant of rebuff, but she answered as simply as though they were discussing the income tax.

"Yes. I have, lately. But I think I'm too much of a coward, though I don't see how anything could hurt me more than to

go on and on and on like this. But if I were sure they loved each other I—I would, of course.”

“Do you think that if you did,” he put in as she hesitated, “that, well, that after a time you could come to me?”

“Perhaps,” she said unhesitatingly, “but it would always be the same. I would want John.”

“Yes, I—I know,” his voice came thickly, “but I’m not sure that even so, you might not be happier.”

She considered this silently for a little time, then she said abruptly, with a whimsicality of nature like an undercurrent in still water:

“Oh, the lure of the thing we can’t have; it’s the only enduring desire in the world.”

“I’ve an idea I would have upset that theory pretty thoroughly, Jane.”

She drew in her breath so sharply it was like a faint cry of pain.

"Oh, my dear, my dear, I would so gladly have given you my love if I could."

"Thank you, beloved," his voice was harsh and toneless and the extravagant word fell queerly from his lips. He got up and cleared his throat.

"You'll take cold in that damp breeze," he said concernedly, and closed the windows.

Dane lay there thinking until long after their indistinct voices were stilled, and finally tired his mind with the tangle of the age-old social sex problem, so that he went up to bed, grateful for any sort of weariness, even that of futility.

The next two days left a mark on Dane's nature for every one of their dragging unreal minutes—minutes in which Dane began to comprehend the depth of his mother's insight in saying, "You mean more to your father than either of you realize." The constraint that had come between them was like a

great merciless light, X-raying them one to the other with unsparing accuracy. Neither of them mentioned anything that had passed and the ignored canker ate deeper and deeper as their outward amicableness increased. The strain showed on them both. They talked constantly when they were together; a short silence put them both frightfully on edge; they talked about the ranch, and Texas oil wells, and railroads and the administration.

Dane began to feel as if they were playing a constant game of tag; wherever he went, whatever he did, his father appeared as by magic, with the same idea in mind. Some other old friends had come out from town and Keith Newland stayed on—the science of guests was a very definite one in their household.

After luncheon on a smotheringly hot afternoon, Dane found the north porch agreeably deserted and flung himself down on the canvas swing for a nap.

He wakened himself crying "Judith!" As always, he had no sooner drifted into sleep than miserable torturing dreams came to him. With a sickening intuition, he felt the presence of his father; had he really called out "Judith?" or had he only dreamed of calling to her? He sat up, stretched with superlative carelessness and yawned audibly. Yes, there sat his father, lounging in an easy chair, reading. Dane got up stealthily and started into the house. He was in the doorway when his father spoke:

"Dane, if there's anything bothering you, I'd be glad to help you if I can."

So he had called aloud; his father had heard him.

"You help me? *You?*" his voice was scathingly bitter; his father seemed to freeze into his immobile lounging attitude.

"I don't wish to force myself on you, of course, nor to urge your confidence. I'm only saying that if I can help you,

I'll be glad to." The effort these words cost made him slightly pale. He adjusted his big glasses and regarded his open book. Dane walked slowly toward him, laughing unpleasantly.

"You help me? Why, you're funny! You help me? My God, if it weren't for you I'd—I'd be—well, it's a cinch I wouldn't be as near insane as I am. Why do you suppose I've lost my girl—why? Because she thinks I'll be like you. That's why. You've made mother's life hell and you've started out fine on mine." He stopped, helplessly swallowing, his elbows doubled, his fists clenched.

His father looked up at him with his inscrutable, expressionless gray eyes, his lips twitched back nervously into a mirthless grin.

"Now you know how I feel, and for God's sake quit following me around—*let me alone!* I can't stand you, that's all there is to it."

He stood an instant longer above the pale silent man in the chair. He felt cold and numb and without emotion, but on the way up-stairs he heard himself whimpering aloud like a worn-out youngster.

He put Thomas to packing his things for the West;—clothes, books, papers, everything. He wanted to leave at once and stay forever. But he had some things he wanted to say to his mother—that he had decided *must* be said. He felt swept clean of the last vestige of youth, and a capacity for judgment, serene and infinite, seemed to have settled upon him. He found his mother out in the west garden sketching in the shade, and dropping down on the grass beside her stool in a jack-knifed posture, hugged his updrawn knees. She was working with water colors, her pad covered with a flat wash of bright red.

“Finish *Serenity*?” he asked, grinning.

“N-o, I wasn’t in the mood for it.”

“Good idea. This promises better. Going to be *Hell*, isn't it? It's nice and red.”

“Oh, Dane!” she gave a little unwilling laugh. “Please, dear, don't—don't start in. I was just going to let my thoughts gather round this and—and see what comes of it.”

“I see. But say, mother, on the square, what good do you get out of this kind of thing?”

“My dear, you must remember that all new movements seem ridiculous to those who aren't interested in them,” she parried.

“Y-es, I suppose that's true. Honest to God though, *are* you interested in it? Or do you just daub around so that that half baked bunch in town will rave over you and let you feed and clothe 'em?”

She flushed painfully and did not answer. He scrutinized her thoughtfully. No woman, however conqueringly lovely,

he thought to himself, could withstand the horror of that hat—an indescribable piece of orange-colored millinery embroidered profusely with butterflies. It seemed doubly ridiculous because of the slender weary face beneath it. He saw that her old timidity of him was creeping out under his scrutiny, but he goaded himself on with what he had determined to say, looking away from her while he talked, his words spilling out in a frenzy of haste lest she should interrupt him.

“Mother, I’ve been thinking a good deal about you these last pleasant days. At first I thought dad was—was, well, just a bounder, the way Judith talked and things looked and everything and the Lord knows I don’t feel any too cordial toward him right now, myself; but you’ve gone at dad wrong, mother. If there’s any thing dad’s keen about it’s a person who doesn’t knuckle under to him, and it looks to me as if that’s what you’ve done

for about twenty-seven years. You've killed your own personality trying so darned hard to please him. Now this fool painting—I know why you do it, you think if you can get a little fame or notoriety out of it that dad'll be pleased in the long run, but it's all rot....dad loathes it....you rub him the wrong way all the time talking about it....if you could beat him eighteen holes of golf he'd think you were some use in the world.

“And another thing—you don't stand up for yourself; when dad gets off one of his mean sarcastic speeches, why don't you blaze away and give him the devil? But *no*....you just go cringing along trying to pretend it didn't hurt you and that everything he says and does pleases you to death....It's no wonder he's forgot you have any feelings. You've trained him to think so. And these darned clothes you wear....they're awful....you're always trying to look like somebody else instead

of getting the kind of clothes *you* want. . . . Why, mother, you don't look any more like *yourself* than—than a rabbit. . . . You've tried to please dad without any respect for yourself until you're not a real person, you're oh, I don't know—just sort of a *trinket*—now I'm not standing up for dad's affairs—not on your life but—”

What had happened?

Carried along by his excited impetuous words and staring hard away from his mother, he had lost all thought of any brutality in his words. A queer rustling noise made him turn his head slowly toward her just in time to see her slipping off the stool into a crumpled little heap on the grass. She fell slightly backward in a horribly awkward posture, her colorless face framed cruelly by the great gaudy hat. For a paralyzing instant he could not move; his hands would not unclasp from around his knees; then, freed sud-

denly from his tension of terror, he sprang to his feet and gathered her up in his arms. The hat lay where he raised her head out of it, like a great seedless sunflower on the grass. Above it stood her easel holding the flat red wash around which her thoughts had not yet "begun to gather themselves."

Cold sweat covered him. How light she was—how could she be so light? Her hairpins loosened and scattered her hair in dusty gray strands over his arm. He began running, trying to call for her maid, old Jennie, who had been with them since she had come to nurse him as a baby, but only hoarse mutterings came from his throat. Jennie had seen them and was holding the porch door open. His fears lightened at sight of her stolid efficient old face.

He was suddenly aware that his father stood back of Jennie staring over her shoulder at his wife's limp figure as if he

were confronted with the actuality of the impossible.

"Is she dead?" he asked in a voice as little like his own as was Jennie's savagely retorted:

"Why should *you* care if she was?"

Dane recalled afterward that his father had ignored this insolence, standing stupidly aside to let the three of them pass and he was immensely glad to have seen that horrified sickened look on his father's face.

"Take her right up to her rooms," Jennie ordered him reassuringly; "she faints sometimes, my poor little lady."

"Why didn't you ever tell me she has these spells?" he demanded in an angry whisper, quieted by the calm manner in which Jennie went about reviving his mother.

Old Jennie gave him a brief but eloquent glare.

"I never s'posed you was interested in

anything but yourself. Here, pour a spoon of that into the water."

Thoroughly reprimanded, he obeyed her orders awkwardly and helped as best he could. Emotion that made his hands tremble, swept over him for that little still figure which had given him life. Old Jennie crooned over her while she worked.

"Poor sweet honey....Jennie's dear good lady....there....feeling better nowthere....there....Jennie's dear sweet lady...."

Suddenly she looked up from bending over the bed.

"God knows I hate to see her like this—the gentlest soul God ever made," she muttered fiercely.

It made Dane think of what Mrs. Sangster had said about his mother's gentleness. He flushed.

"What,—what makes these?" he stammered.

"Oh, torment I s'pose; nothing else to

call it—just torment; what she gets for always thinking and doing good for them as don't deserve it. I can tell you, there's some folks on this earth that ought to be—”

She smothered her vengeful words before the rebuke in his steady gaze and went on with her work, muttering unintelligibly.

Finally his mother opened her eyes; they were dream-drowsy and unseeing. Dane, sitting at the head of her bed, forgot Jennie, forgot everything in the hot wave of remorse that swept him.

“Oh, mother,” he choked, “I’m so damn sorry; I—I—are you all right?”

Her dull gaze lightened a little as it found his stricken one and she smiled wearily. One of her thin fluttering hands reached up toward his face, but fell. He caught it up tightly under his throat.

“That’s the trouble....a trinket.... nothing but a trinket....I know you’re

right, dear....but let's....let's not talk about it any more....not any more...." Her distressed words fluttered out on faint breaths. Then her eyes knew Jennie, who was staring, petrified.

"Isn't it nice he loves me, Jennie?" she said like a pleased, proud little child as she dropped back in the pillows.

"She'll sleep now," said old Jennie, her tears dropping down on the white covers, "she always goes to sleep afterward. And—and I should hope to God you *did* love her; sure it was only her prayers kept you safe over there."

"Go on out," he told her shortly. "I'll stay here a while."

So Jennie, communing audibly with the saints, left him alone with his mother.

Once he heard his father come to the outer door, and heard old Jennie's curt denying voice, and heard the door close in the expressive way that Jennie made it her privilege occasionally to close doors.

He sat there for over an hour, sometimes leaning close over his mother's tired fragile face. She lay with her head slightly turned on the pillow, and the curl that was like Judith's lay in a damp ringlet just back of her small prettily shaped ear; it was still reddish brown—a poignant memory of her girlhood. He touched it with slow gentle fingers.

“I'll bet she was a pretty little thing,” he thought to himself.

She wakened slowly, and stared at him wonderingly.

“Hello,” he said, “how d' you feel?”

She smiled tremulously, her eyes remembering.

“W-ell, not exactly like golf, but I might practise ‘blazing away like the devil.’ ”

He knew by her eyes that this pretense of jest did not come easily.

“Oh say, mother, you know I'm mighty sorry. I didn't have any idea....

I didn't know....you see I—I—" the careful speech he had formulated while she slept, shattered into useless bits.

"How could you know?" she said gently, after a long uncomfortable pause, moistening her lips as she spoke, "how could you know how weak a woman can be? It—it was mostly the heat, dear; I do not stand this hot weather very well. But I think we won't talk about these—these things any more."

He bent close over her, freed of embarrassment, unconscious of everything but his desire to drive that humiliated hurt out of her face.

"Don't feel like that, mother, don't. You see I know dad loves you but—but he's just like I was, I guess. If I hadn't got this jolt about Judith I probably wouldn't have realized that you aren't getting much fun out of life; and all dad needs—"

"*Dane!* oh, you wouldn't say anything!

You mustn't—oh, I couldn't *bear* to have him know I—”

He took hold of her arms and held her firmly.

“S-ay, mother,” he said in a slow low voice, “what d’ you think?—do you think I’m *for* you, or not?”

With a little cry, half of pain and half of joy, she put her arms round his neck, and he held her against his shoulder, patting her awkwardly. He kept her there because it was easier to talk, not seeing her face.

“You know I’ve got a plan that’s going to make you jump right out of bed and forget how to faint for the rest of your life. It’s no habit for a lady a-tall. And before I spring this plan I want to tell you that there’s no use objecting nor saying a word because you’re going to do just what I say. And that is this, to-morrow night you take the flier with me for Wyoming; not a word to any-

body but Jennie, and you'll take enough stuff to last till Christmas or maybe a year. We'll leave a note for dad, which *I* will write, but you will copy. And we'll try a little ranching instead of romance. That's all there is to the plan, so far."

She was trembling and he felt tears on his neck.

"Now, mother," he said fiercely, "can the tears! That's the kind of stuff we're going to *cut out*, I tell you!"

His mother pushed away to look at him, the glow in her wet eyes defying her tears.

"I'm not crying. Don't be so overbearing," she surprised him. "I always have wanted to ride steers and tame rattlesnakes."

CHAPTER XI

GOSSIP FROM HOME

ON a sunny day in October, Mrs. Elridge sat reading a letter from Dane, written five days before in New York City. She sat astride a buckskin cowpony in the shade of Perkins' General Mercantile Store of Sage City, Wyoming. The day was hot, and hazy with dust that had perfumed itself in hot little gray leaves of sage-brush while it had rested from the fitful winds. Mrs. Elridge wore a gray trousered riding habit, a Stetson hat, and diminutive brown boots. Unless one had looked closely under the straight-brimmed hat, she might have been the girl of twenty that her slender figure suggested.

She had slipped the mail into the

saddle-bag, but after she mounted, she took out Dane's letter, held the envelope in her teeth, and read the careless scrawl eagerly through to the end.

"Dear Mother:

"Well, it's too quiet here for me; I don't know how I ever thought I could stand it a month. I'm leaving to-morrow; I'll see you then on Tuesday if Number 41 doesn't jump the track. Nothing has changed here, not a thing, since we left; I'll wager there's been a dozen changes out there though, in these three weeks. I went over to the gallery yesterday to see your pictures. Took dad. The Englishman has taken away the one he bought, but the other one looked great. I could smell your sage-brush and hear your prairie dogs bark. Old Frozen-face Van Raesler treated us almost like human beings so you see you've landed the family, artistically. I wish you could have seen dad's face! Say really, mother, we've got to relent pretty soon; and ask dad to come out for a while; he's beginning to look like Grandfather Elridge in his last days. Gosh, I never had any idea I was such a bright boy. I couldn't help rubbing it into him a little about old Keith—I didn't

lie much and it worked so beautifully you'll never believe it. But I never opened my head about his coming out for a while; just said I hoped Newland could come out again because his last visit seemed to do you so much good. He said last night—but I'll tell you all this gossip in a day or two.

“You bet I wish I were there right now.

“Affectionately,

“Dane.”

No one had come up from the ranch the day before for the mail. It was now Tuesday, and Number 41 was due in half an hour. Four months before, Mrs. Elridge would have waited for Dane's arrival and left it for him to arrange about getting to the ranch. Now, she promptly swung off her horse, telephoned to the foreman to send a man to Sage City in the roadster who would ride the buckskin back, leaving the car for herself and Dane. It was a small matter, but significant.

When Dane dropped off the great black train that slowed, snorting with im-

patience, at Sage City, the first thing he noticed was a change in the small town's contour.

"By jove, I knew it!" he greeted his mother, "this place doesn't stand still. What happened to the Broadway?"

The Broadway had been the tar paper movie palace of Sage City. Its luckless proprietor had innocently enough put forth some prohibition propaganda on the screen, merely as a matter of contemporary enlightenment but which was taken as an effort at moral persuasion by the "Lazy A" cowboys, whose disapproving shots set fire to the curtain, speedily reducing the Broadway to an odorous heap of repentant ashes.

"Didn't I tell you," gloated Dane on learning its fate. "Now where would you get such freedom of expression in New York? Say! you look fit, mother. Want to drive?"

"No. I want to listen. How's your father looking, dear?"

"Like this." He left off his gear manipulating to give her an exaggerated representation of limp shoulders, sagging mouth, and discouraged cigarette. "Yes, on the level he does. Looks like a man on a street corner that you want to give ten dollars."

"Oh, Dane," she said in a distressed voice.

"None of that, mother. He doesn't get out here for a couple of months yet, so don't weaken."

"I didn't mean I want to see your father," she said quickly, "you'd be surprised if you knew how little I want to see him."

Dane turned a startled face upon her, a face whose tan was eaten away around the edges by the last three weeks' civilization.

"Say! there aren't going to be any complications in this, are there?"

She looked out at the rapidly fleeting fence posts.

“Oh, no; but I don’t want to see him. I want to go on with my painting, and with all these things out here, and really enjoy them.” Since he said nothing she went on stumblingly: “Now that you’ve convinced me that a woman’s greatest mistake is to make her love her ‘whole existence’ you don’t want me to back-slide, do you? With your father three thousand miles away, I’m succeeding very well, I think, in keeping it a ‘thing apart.’ But when I’m with him—oh, it just sort of eats me up, I don’t know how to express it but—but I’m afraid I’m not well enough rehearsed to be exhibited yet a while.”

Dane gave a short laugh. The four months he and his mother had spent together out in this big hilly country had developed a very comfortable friendship between them, and he was surprised a little at the depth of his pleasure in being with her again after only three weeks’ separation.

"I know what you mean," he told her easily, "that's why I didn't rise to any of dad's subtle suggestion that he might come out for a while. Here, hold my hat. Gosh, I like the feel of this air out here. Dad just simply can't swallow the fact that he isn't wanted. It's huge. But you know, mother, it's natural enough—about dad, I mean. Until a thing hits you, you don't know how somebody else feels when it hits them. I don't suppose you ever thought about it, but dad's never been lonesome before in his life; he's never been left before; he's always done the leaving, himself,—left you for a trip when he wanted to, and come back to you when he wanted to. And oh, by jove, I wish you could have heard him pump me about old Keith's visit out here."

His laugh rang out with a heartiness that surprised even himself; there had been very little hearty laughter in his heart since he lost Judith. But his mother

answered seriously, though she smiled slightly:

"I can't quite picture your father suffering much from jealousy. I hope, my dear, that in the enthusiasm of your experimenting you weren't forgetful of Keith's dignity."

"Oh, don't worry; I devoted myself wholly to your side of it. Why shouldn't dad be jealous? He's just like anybody else, only you've never developed his possibilities. Gosh, I wish I'd taken you and dad in hand sooner."

His mother leaned back, shaken with laughter. "You funny, funny thing, you," she gasped.

"W-ell, you'll see," he challenged her, grinning.

"Did you get the blue paint?" she asked in a diverting tone.

"Yes; that is, dad did. I happened to say one night at dinner that I couldn't find the kind you wanted and that I guessed

I'd phone out to old Keith to look it up for you. Dad sort of growls out, 'Oh, let Newland alone. What kind of stuff does she want?' So I gave him those hieroglyphics you gave me, and he finally dug a couple of tubes of it out of the ghetto, I think he said—took him two days to find it. Now just picture *dad* sequestering in the ghetto, and then say I'm 'funny!' "

"He must have been unbelievably impressed with my pictures," she said, again divertingly, "did he seem really to *like* them?"

"Why, of course. You know dad isn't any stronger on sentiment than I am, but he kept saying, 'I'd no idea on earth she could paint like this.' Oh, I didn't write you what Van Raeslener said, did I? He kept raving on about your 'inclusive atmosphere' till dad asked what he meant. Then he told us the reason your pictures were better than the other western pictures in the gallery was because you not

only painted what you saw, but what you heard and smelled. The old nut was right, too; I got exactly what he meant. And dad—”

“Oh, stop!” cried his mother laughingly, but underneath the lightness was the emotional strain Dane had come to understand. “Don’t tell me any more for a while, or I’ll surely burst with—with conceit. Tell me something about yourself, now. What did you do and whom did you see?”

Dane knew that the real question in her mind was about Judith, but she had never broken her promise given the day they started west, not to mention Judith to him in any way. In recognition of this, and because his heart was full to bursting with its fresh pain, he replied generously:

“Well, when I wasn’t memorizing messages to take to my illustrious mother, I was talking oil to a lot of wooden heads that think all the oil in the country has

run down to Texas; but I got a few interested, I think. Saw the usual bunch of fellows at the club—Bill Newland's up from Camp Humphrey; went out to Whitelaws' for dinner one night, they're still in the country; saw Judith at the theater one night; Mrs. Sangster and I sat right behind her and Bill. She's thin—doesn't look so well as she did."

"Neither do you," said his mother.

He accepted her meaning without subterfuge.

"Well, it's a cinch I'm not the reason that *she's* wasting away. She's going to marry Bill in the spring."

"I wondered if you'd hear it. She wrote me about it last month."

"Well, why in the name of God didn't you tell me!" the words burst out before he could think.

"I wanted to; I almost did. But if you remember, you were rather more than emphatic last June about my keeping every-

thing I knew about Judith to myself. And I didn't know what might happen. I haven't answered her letter yet. I couldn't. I'm so certain that she loves *you*."

Dane, superlatively intent on keeping the roadster in the narrow dusty road, felt a great yearning to put his head down on that small shoulder beside him and be comforted by arms as tender as was the caress in his mother's voice. But he said only:

"I don't think she'd marry Bill, if she loved me."

"Oh!" she cried out furiously, "she isn't worth your sorrowing over; I could murder the little idiot;—to marry that great stupid Billy!"

Dane gave an incredulous shout and threw a rough right arm about her, making her cry out sharply, so fierce was his quick hug.

"By golly, mother, you're certainly

coming along! You've—you've evidently reversed your opinion. Remember—"

He left his sentence unmade, and drove on silently, glad that she did not take up his thought. The wind blew his fine heavy black hair back from his forehead and whipped into his black eyes, so that he scowled through half-shut lids. His cheeks were slightly hollowed, as they had been when he had first come home from the French hospital, and his jaws were more firmly set than ever, though less sullenly so. The four months had done good things to his soul but their pain had left its traces. One of the ranch hands who had also learned the song of the German guns, had one day said to Mrs. Elridge, seeing her eyes perhaps sorrowing over her son:

"Don't you worry about him, ma'am; he just ain't quite got over old Thierry, yet. That's what makes that listenin' look in his eyes, sometimes."

But No-Man's Land had held less dreaded loneliness for Dane, than the long days and nights of emptiness that tortured him with mocking memories of Judith.

"You felt just the same—when you saw her?" he heard his mother saying.

"Oh, yes. That's the hell of it. Why couldn't she marry somebody I don't know? But all my life I'll go on seeing her, and hearing people talk about her, and acting just as I should to any wife of Bill's, no matter what he married. It isn't so bad at the time—when I'm seeing her, but afterward—it's like coming out of ether into hell."

"I know, dear," said his mother softly, and added after a small silence: "Love, real love, is not easily made a 'thing apart.'"

He gave a short unamused laugh at her apt return of the philosophy he had youthfully preached to her.

“Well, I’ll do it, never you fear. I’m not fool enough to think there aren’t other things in the world that are mighty worth while.”

“Did you see much of Mrs. Sangster?” asked his mother, as if accepting his blusterful statement by her very question.

“Yes,” he said—sufficiently.

It was the first time she had mentioned Mrs. Sangster, though he was certain that she knew he heard from her and that she must be sorely puzzled over what, to her, was an unthinkable situation. Now, he found courage to say, reddening:

“Has dad written you anything about her—lately?”

“No; I—I think he spoke some time ago of, of not seeing her.”

The color deepened in his high cheekbones.

“I’ve an idea, that is, I happen to know, that we were both mistaken about dad and Mrs. Sangster.”

“Yes. I can understand that we must have been.” The queer tightness that took hold of his mother’s delicate features made him more sharply aware of the emotion she was concealing than of her actual words, so quietly spoken.

“Don’t hate her, mother,” he said impulsively, “she—she isn’t such a bad sort.”

“Why, Dane, I don’t; I—I even....it sounds a dreadful thing for a mother to say, but I don’t think knowing her can ever do you any harm. I always felt there was a wonderful kindness about the woman. Even—even under the conditions, I didn’t hate her.”

Dane swallowed several times before the lump in his throat would let his voice pass.

“You’re a real brick, mother; it’s deuced hard for me ever to say anything but—but you’ve meant a heap to me.”

“And you to me, dear,” she said only;

and after a time they fell to talking hurriedly of little things that did not matter, until they drove up to the big log ranch house with its numerous additions, that looked, from the hills above, like a huge brown horned toad sunning itself in an oasis of blue grass and shivering cottonwood trees.

Dane's room was a great square place on top of the house, built over the exact center of the otherwise one-storied structure. It had three wide windows in each wall, the ones on the west looking up through ascending corridors of brown hills to the great blue Big Horn Mountains. It was the first room Dane had ever grown attached to. One reached it by ascending an outside stairway fashioned clumsily but securely of fragrant old pine logs.

His mother had put in curtains and cushions and cretonnes of brown that she and Jennie had proudly made themselves;

and his few war trophies were modestly hung up in the darkest corner. There had been a picture of Judith on the table—a large picture of her, with her winsome happy face lit so warmly by its candid eyes. He put it out of sight the first night of his return.

But—a thing apart?

No night in that big clean-aired room had Dane found sleep unprefaced by long tortured wakefulness. No day of all the busy days had passed without some of his men noticing that “listenin’ look” on his stern young face.

Long into the night of his homecoming, he lay looking out of the west windows into a world drunk with a vast stillness, living and reliving that night at the theater, seeing nothing of the gay glad crowd except Judith’s shoulder touching Bill Newland’s, meeting her surprised eyes when she turned and saw him, suffering under their instant’s wild welcome so

quickly veiled with indifference, hearing her careless, "Why, Dane, you globe-trotter; it's awfully nice to see you—Billy said you were in town."

Of what Mrs. Sangster had said that evening, or Newland, or himself, he remembered nothing, for Judith's few words and fewer smiles had burned all other things into their own white memories.

He had gone to New York, driven by desire of Judith—if only to see her, hear people speak of her, perhaps talk to her. And now, he was back again, with his fool's errand amply proved. She had asked him about his ranching—carelessly; she had spoken of his mother's pictures—with a keen gladness that was all for his mother; and she had said once, turning toward Newland, saying it, with her hand on his arm, "Aunt Ellen has been fretting about a sweater she's made for you. I think she's afraid to trust it

to the mails. Can she send it in to the club for you?"

That was all, just little careless senseless things that flaunted their inconsequence maddeningly in his mind. But as they were leaving the theater she had come to his side to say in low quick tones:

"Billy's Uncle Keith told Aunt Ellen how happy your mother is out there with you, and—and how wonderful you've been to her. Oh, Dane, we're *so* glad."

And then his armor of determination failed him—poor weak fool, and the misery in his heart had blurted out in uncontrollable, unthought words. He did not know what they were, but she had answered in quick displeasure:

"Dane! Please don't make a scene here. Certainly I do not blame you—you can not help being as you are; how can you *dare*—with her—to ask me if I've changed my mind?"

"Then it is true—about Bill?" he knew he had asked her that.

“Yes; perhaps in the spring,” she had answered defiantly. And then the others joined them and they parted, laughingly.

That was the night he wrote his mother he couldn't stand New York any longer and was leaving the next day. In the morning his father had casually turned up at Grand Central to see him off; he had even walked through the gates with him and down the long platform to Dane's Pullman. Yet there had been no weakening of the restraint between them—no mention in any way of the things that weighted both minds. It was the magnet of enveloping love—the love of the slender black-eyed woman who had made them father and son, that was drawing them, irresistibly, into a consciousness of their need for each other.

CHAPTER XII

THE QUIET COMING

LESS than two weeks after Dane's return, his father arrived at the Bar Three ranch. The afternoon had been hot and sunny; one of summer's left-over days, and Dane rode in, dusty and tired, from the site where he hoped to build his great reservoir. The two eastern engineers he had taken with him, and whom he had later put on the east-bound train, had been enthusiastic over the project and Dane's mind was pleasantly weary from its vast conjecturing, when he gladly threw himself full length on the comfortable couch in the living-room. The room was empty, warmed by a noisy pine log fire in the cavernous fireplace.

Presently his mother came in, carrying a vase of water and some red dahlias. She did not notice him lying there. Setting the vase on the table in the center of the long room, she began arranging the flowers. She would put one blossom in the vase, and then, as if the small effort wearied her, she would stand quiet, looking at it. Then she would take another flower, carefully place it, and rest.

"What a little thing she is," thought Dane, indolently watching her.

She wore a blue serge gown, skilfully cut on straight youthful lines, with a round collarless throat and a narrow belt that twice circled her waist and tied at one side, ending in some sort of colorful beads. Her soft gray, simply coiffured hair had lost all traces of artificiality and her features, delicate sometimes to sharpness, had taken on a certain fulness. Long deep breaths lifted her sloping shoulders.

"Something's happened," Dane's intuition told him.

She seemed to fill the room—not by the presence of her small body but by an escaping intensity of feeling as all-pervading as a fragrance or a vibrating sound.

"Well, mother, spread the glad tidings; get good news about your cow path?" he asked her. The "cow path" was her last picture, merely a narrow twisting path on a brown hillside, lost after long wandering, in a hot light blue sky.

She started slightly at the sound of his unexpected voice.

"Oh, no; I haven't had time to hear from it yet. I didn't know you'd come in."

"What is the news, then?"

"What a wizard you are! What makes you think there's news?"

"Oh, I'm getting to be a regular mind-reader; whenever you make me think of a large quiet firecracker with the fuse lit, I know something's happened."

She laughed—a sound he never forgot—a low throaty sound far beyond the realms of mirth or pleasure—a sound of fulfillment, of unbelievable joy; a thing of the soul rather than of the body. He felt the exceeding effort she put forth to appear unemotional, matter-of-fact.

“Your father’s here; he’s bathing and dressing for dinner. I—I’m very happy.”

He always remembered her as she stood there by the table, facing him, a few ragged dahlias in her hands, and her deep black eyes like long darkened pools suddenly touched with sunlight. Silently and without volition, he got up from the couch and started toward her and she dropped the flowers in her path as she went across the long room to meet him. Hugging her close, he bent and kissed her cheek, which, though it was queerly pale, burned feverishly hot against his wind-roughened lips.

With his impulsive tenderness came the

old embarrassment that emotion had always bred in him. He loosed her almost roughly, muttering a brusque, "Well, it's time you got some fun out of life; I'll chase up and dress now, I guess," and without looking at her he bolted out of the room.

He was vastly and thankfully relieved at dinner to find that an inexplicable lenity had eased the restraint he had expected would exist between them—a staggering proof of love's power to unravel lifetime tangles once it set about it. It was past human conception to think of his father as anything other than coolly composed and imperturbable, but he seemed to have emerged from a veneer of stoical indifference that uncovered the charm he had seldom bothered to display to his own family. And he was older—where before he had seemed strangely ageless, he had become suddenly middle aged.

Old Jennie served them, looking, when her eyes rested on Mr. Elridge, as Dane imagined she might look were the mysteries of infinity unveiled before her awed but skeptical gaze. All through dinner they talked extravagantly of impersonal things—of where their friends were and what they were doing—of the ouija-board craze—of alfalfa and oil wells and the Peace Treaty.

In fact they “visited”—a thing that had never happened before; they visited together as naturally as if they had been a family given to intimacies and careless comfortable chatter of the day’s doings, instead of three alien house dwellers who, if there were not guests, quickly found oblivion in reading, or went hastily to their different diversions.

After dinner Dane left his father and mother together on the west porch, for the evening was warm and pungently fragrant of frost-touched alfalfa fields; seemingly

one of summer's truant days had come wandering on lazy feet into October's calendar.

But he was restless—lonely. After a little time he came back to them, settling down two steps below his mother, leaning back lightly against her knees and she let her hand lie idly on his shoulder. He knew that he had interrupted words that had meant much to her for he could hear her breath fluttering like a moth beating its wings to tatters against a sunny window. His heart was greatly glad for her. Urged by a sympathetic impulse, he tipped his head to one side so that he embraced her hand between his cheek and shoulder. He grinned a little in the deepening dusk to think of his stoical father learning to express humility, and his old trench pipe seemed especially satisfactory as he drew deeply of its pleasure.

“You two seem to have a pretty close corporation,” remarked his father, in a

tone peculiarly not his own, perhaps not quite freed from what he had been saying.

“We’ve had some good days out here, and dreamed some big dreams, haven’t we, mother?” Dane said in lazy explanation. “You see, if it hadn’t been for mother, I’d never have inherited Grandmother Stillman’s money, and so I’d never have had this flock of hills. And I like ’em. I get all sorts of kick out of just sitting and looking at ’em and thinking, ‘By golly, you runt of a mountain, you belong to *me!*’ I’ll cover ’em all with green, some day, and pump oil out of every one of ’em.”

This was an astounding gasconade to come from Dane’s practical lips, and he laughed with a slight consciousness as he went on to ask, “What’s that verse in the Bible about hills, mother?”

“I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help.”

It seemed to Dane that his mother’s

voice was stiller than the silence of the night. He twisted his head to look inquiringly up at her and she smiled at him through the dusk. It was almost dark and a chill was creeping, catlike, up from the creek.

"Well," said his father carelessly, "I don't want to force myself into your hill corporation but if it hadn't been for me you might not have had your mother, nor your grandmother nor your hills."

"Oh, sure," Dane retorted impulsively, "we expected you to jump right in and vote yourself president; but at that, we're a pretty close corporation."

"N-o, I'm contented to be a minority stockholder. I think your mother's the president and secretary and treasurer." His voice took on a certain gravity and weight of meaning that filled Dane instantly with discomfort. Now that he had succeeded in weaning his mother away from sentiment, had his hitherto in-

vulnerable father been bitten in the heel? But the older man cleared his throat—of nothing, and said no more. However strongly any regrets or emotion might have awakened in his heart, they were impregnably fortified there against expression.

“I was just asking your mother if she’d consider going back with me for a little visit,” Mr. Elridge resumed in his usual, pleasantly modulated voice.

“Not on your life, dad,” put in Dane quickly, amusedly relieved, “this ranch couldn’t run without some one to paint pictures of it; these cow paths and corrals have got to be exhibited in foreign galleries—they’ve only reached New York so far. I vote that mother stays right here until everybody throws away their Corots and buys views of the Bar Three ranch. Besides, by golly, I need her! Be a deuce of a lonesome place here.”

“Yes,” commented his father dryly,

“your last argument coincides with mine. I need her, too. What’s the verdict, Jane?”

In the silence that followed his father’s overly careless question, they heard the dry cottonwood leaves whispering in the dark; and the sharp shrilling cry of a red winged, black bird, no doubt disturbed by some prowling wild thing, shook the stillness, echoingly. It’s eerie unexpectedness made Dane start and his abrupt movement away from his mother’s knees loosed her from the posture in which she had been braced between his back and the porch post. Stabbed by a strange divining of her silence, he turned just in time to have her slip gently—such a tiny crumpled burden—into his arms.

“Call Jennie....she’s fainted....Call Jennie,” he commanded.

Mr. Elridge, unfamiliar in the darkness, fumbled for the door-latch, his one echoing shout bringing the old servant

hastening to the door, a lamp perilously rocking in her upheld hand.

“This horseback riding’s been too much for her,” he muttered as he held the door open for Dane to pass. Jennie gave him one swift-covering glance, just as she had done months before on that hot day in June, but her words fell with lesser venom:

“The doctors has said often enough it’s not things that hurts *her body* that—that makes her faint.” Somehow her gesture forbade his entering with them and he stayed outside in the darkness while Dane strode through the rambling house to the south bedroom, casting a weird shapeless shadow before him from Jennie’s following lamp.

With her great dark eyes closed, his mother’s face seemed strangely not her own. Dane had not been frightened, as he had before, but now a sudden terror took him. “What’ll I do, Jennie—

quick!" he demanded. "Oh, why in the devil didn't I have that lighting plant put in last month; curse these clammy lamps. What'll I do?"

Jennie, in the four months, had become his slowly forgiving friend; now, she said soothingly from the medicine closet:

"Don't get excited, Mr. Dane, put her head low—that's right. Go out and tell Ching to heat the big copper kettle of water and bring it to me. You run along. I'll put her to bed. She's better, alone."

Dane stood motionless, gazing down at the small quiet figure laid so straight on the bed. The fluttering lamplight cast fulvid shadows over her slender face and he thought again of his old fancy that she looked like one of the pressed flowers often fluttering from her books. He felt a childish frenzy of desire to have her open her eyes.

"*Jennie!*—does she always look like this?"

“Yes. Go on, Mr. Dane, tell Ching I want that water quick.”

After he had set the complacent Ching into a remarkable demonstration of Chinese speed, Dane went out to his father whose cigar leered, one-eyedly, out of the darkness.

“Is she conscious?”

“No.” Dane leaned against the post and stared out into the night until the mountains finally established their gigantic heights against the unstarred sky. “It must be going to rain,” he said after a time.

His father got up and stood by the other porch post. “Is this the first time she’s fainted since you came out?”

“Yes. Why didn’t you telegraph us? You knew about her heart.”

“Oh! You don’t think—why it didn’t occur to me. I thought I’d like to drop in on you just as you were every day. If I’d had any idea—”

Dane's whole being was welling with a dull resentment, almost an impersonal feeling, and he said slowly in a passionless unbittered voice:

"Oh, you wouldn't have any idea about anything but yourself—but what *you* happened to want. You ought to have married Medusa—*she* might have been able to get your mind off yourself occasionally."

His father said nothing. Dane was quickly and horribly ashamed.

"I'm sorry, dad. I didn't mean to go off like that; but she's been so well; I—I hate—"

"I should have telegraphed," his father inserted in a coldly mechanical voice, "you needn't apologize. You needn't apologize to me—ever, about anything. I realize there are many things I have done and have not done which are not to my credit. I realize that you have rectified them for me in so far as you

could. I think it's due your mother that I should say so to you as well as to her. In the future it will be—different."

Confusion sharper than knife wounds bore down on Dane; had he been able to find his voice he could not have found words to put in it. So they stood there together, silent. And Dane knew that he should love his father after this, as he had often envied other sons and fathers their love of each other.

Then, cutting the silence like a merciless weapon, old Jennie's cry thrust itself into the night.

"Mr. *Dane!* Mr. *D-ane!*"

Dane felt his father's hand grip his arm, but he threw it off, calling back, "Telephone Sage City for the doctor," as he ran through the long living-room. But he knew quite simply and surely, that his mother was dead. It seemed to him that he had known it since he had first put her out of his arms.

CHAPTER XIII

DON'T YOU WANT ME

THREE weeks from that night of death's quiet coming, Dane was back again at the Bar Three ranch. It was November now, —a month of incomparable majesty in the western hills where no sacrifices are made to autumn except a few yellow cottonwood leaves which are so soon chewed to dust by the singing winds. In all the world there is no greater loneliness, nor yet greater content if love is there.

The night was like a frozen day in the quietness of its clear sparkling moonlight. Dane drew the curtains early—the first time they had ever been drawn, pulled the couch out in front of the fire, and placed the tall lamp at its head so

that he might read the piles of journals lying on the tabourette beside him. He took one up and opened it but soon put it back and lay watching and listening to the noisy fire. Jennie moved solidly and complacently in and out of the room; he wondered if she knew he liked to hear her bustling about, mumbling, he supposed to angels, in that queer way of hers. He had been immensely glad when she had announced her intention of returning with him.

On one of her pilgrimages into the room she dropped an ash-tray, making vast apologies.

"Oh, never mind, Jennie," he silenced her, "I'd rather you'd break everything in the place than have it so damned still."

"It does seem awful still, don't it?" she hastened into conversation. "I guess it's the feeling of fall. You never did like it quiet, anyhow. When you was a baby, you always slept better if there was a

racket around you. Why don't you send for that foreman man to come up and talk a while; thinkin'—times like this, don't do any good."

"N-o, I guess you're right; it's a little late to begin thinking now. Jennie, what do you really think made mother go—like that?"

Jennie's answer was sure and swift, exultant and unsorrowing. She came around by the fire to emphasize her convictions by definite gestures with a piece of the broken ash-try.

"It was her time to go, Mr. Dane; don't have any doubts about that—*her time*. An' what's more, it was a beautiful time! She was so happy that day that when I fastened up her dress I felt like the snappers had electric sparks in 'em. An' she said to me—you know her and your father had a long talk before you came home,—an' she said to me, 'Jennie, it's very wonderful when you've tried to do

your best all your life and thought you'd failed in spite of it, to find—you haven't.' Now maybe, Mr. Dane, she couldn't have gone on bein' that happy always an'—"

"Yes, she could, Jennie," he put in heavily, "that's it—she could have."

A very gentle smile touched Jennie's thin lips, as she looked down at him.

"W-ell, maybe, Mr. Dane, maybe; but I reckon God knew best. But I've my reasons for thinking your mother felt maybe she wasn't going to live very long. She said to me one day just after you come back from New York, 'Jennie, if anything should happen to me, I want you always to pray for Dane every night!' She and I didn't pray the same as each other, but I'm prayin' for you, my way, the best I know how."

"Why—why, thank you, Jennie," stammered Dane, deeply touched by the old woman's solemn confidence. "I hope you can pray oil into these hills."

“Oh, I don’t bother about them kind of things. I pray that you’ll be a good man—I mean, keep on being a good man, and that”—she gasped an instant hesitating and then finished, greatly daring—“you’ll marry Judith Kingston.”

“*Hunh?*” For a second he was sharply angered by her impertinence; then he surrendered to the relief of speaking about Judith, hearing of her, mentioning her name. “Well, Jennie, there’s no use your wasting good prayers. Miss Kingston’s going to marry Major Newland in the spring. Didn’t you know it?”

Jennie sat down in a small rocker and began rocking back and forth with a vigor that only providence restrained from creating catastrophe. “Spring’s a long way off, Mr. Dane; I—I just been biding my time to talk to you a little about this. I know Judith Kingston almost ’s well ’s I know you. An’ I watched her pretty close all the time she and Mrs. Lawson

was at the house getting ready for the funeral. I may be an old maid an' all, but I've kept my eye open on other folks an' I know love when I see it. An' that girl loves you, Mr. Dane, just as sure"—she poised on the front tip of the rockers—"just as sure as I sit here."

She waited for him to speak but only a queer tight grin answered her, so she resumed her rocking.

"An' that day they went back to Long Island I made bold to say to her, 'Miss Judith, Dane Elridge is an awful fine young man; I'm afraid you're makin' a very serious mistake not to marry the man you love.' " She paused again, tipped forward at a perilous angle, and looking in her slippery black silk dress rather like a trained sea lion performing miraculous feats of sitting upon nothing. To Dane, watching her through half-closed lids, she seemed oddly beautiful—this old grim woman who was so earnestly "carrying

on" his mother's love and prayers for him.

"An'," she went on, a trifle less assuredly, "an' naturally she was some surprised, she said something about trust between two people being able to grow love but that love couldn't live without trust; but—but she never denied she loved you."

Dane cleared his throat and smiled into the wrinkled-wise old face; she could have uttered no words more livening to his pain.

"Yes, she may love me, Jennie," he admitted quietly, "but that's no argument in this case. Be better to pray that I can get her out of my mind. Say, did that other trunk get here to-day?"

She accepted his dismissal impassively and pushed her ample figure slowly out of the small chair, turning the big lamp down a little as she went by it.

"Yes; I unpacked it; I put the things

I didn't know what to do with, on the shelf in your closet. I'd read a little now, if I was you."

"Yes, I will, Jennie. Good night."

But before she was out of the room, he was back in their old Tarrytown house—a house strangely undarkened, with no crêpe on the door. His mother's body lay in the south drawing-room where the sun came in and rested with autumn gentleness about the flower banked coffin. It was there beside that coffin, that he had spoken, alone, to Judith for the only time during the days that she lived in his own house, when he had watched her doing the things for his mother that she would have done had she been his wife. For she and Aunt Lawson, the women his mother most loved, had taken care of the flowers, the telegrams, the messages; had seen the friends—the old friends, and the countless unassuming, unknown friends of hers who came with shy courage to offer the hom-

age of their love and sorrow. For his mother's death had been like pulling up a vine whose myriad tendrils had crept unnoticed, but surely and securely, into a thousand hidden places, where she had helped, quietly, some struggling life, or eased some sorrow. Her life had been almost as quiet a thing as was her death, a quietness they had as little understood as death.

Dane had been thinking of that as he stood beside her bed of blossoms on the morning that Judith came into the room, not knowing him there. He looked and saw her hesitate the merest moment; then she came softly to his side.

He felt her sympathy; knew that she loved him.

"Judith—can you doubt that I love you, when I tell you so beside her, here?"

A tremor quivered over her tall still body, and the slight color that was in her cheeks left them completely.

"I believe that you love me, Dane," she whispered.

"And still you won't marry me?"

"Must you ask this—*here*?"

"She knows how I love you; she felt you loved me; can you deny it?"

"No," she said aloud in a clear voice, lifting her face to his, so strengthened with pain-born resolve that any poor hope in his heart died eternally. "Perhaps here I can make you understand. Your father loved your mother—we all know it, now that he suffers. What has she had from that love? What have you, her son, had from it? If I married you my love would overpower my strength of will. But now, I can be strong. I love you—but I shall make it the love of a friend. I know your mother would understand."

"Yes," he said, soul deep bitterness in his low vibrating voice, "perhaps she would understand—both of us. She was better at understanding than you or I."

He turned away from her and Judith left him standing there beside his mother. And after that he had spoken to Judith with the tongue of a stranger.

It was as his mother had told him; Judith was of the new generation of women, strong in the resolve not to let love ravage all other values in life, and—oh, deepest irony, she was an unswerving exponent of the very philosophy with which he had, blunderingly and boyishly, but with odd fortune, sought to rebuild his mother's life.

Lying there by the chattering fire, his reason and his bitterness tortured his brain with their unceasing battle....

"She's a coward, afraid to follow her love....she's not a coward, it takes deeper courage to repel love than to follow it....

"She's selfish, thinking only of her surety, her happiness, her well being.... She's *not* thinking only of herself; it's I who am doing that; she's thinking of both of us, later on—and children....

"If her love were like mine she'd trust me, she wouldn't be suspicious....ah, but what surety can I give her," argued his reason. "I did take the easiest way to forgetfulness....but, why not?....why not?....I wanted only her....only her...."

At midnight he went up-stairs to bed, but the stillness smothered him and would not let him sleep. Once a coyote howled, and went unanswered; probably some poor mateless thing whose mate the ranch dogs had killed. Its futile desolate cry, by a queer crossing of mental paths, made Dane think of his father's face as it had come to look in these last weeks. Echoing in through the hills throbbed the swift coming "Flier" speeding through the silence of the night like some infernal serpent whose Gorgon breathing, pulsing nearer and nearer in steady rhythm, sent Dane into restless sleeping. When its scream of fury cut the stillness at Sage

City, it brought Dane jagged dreams of broken fences, cattle on the track.... danger.... Judith riding to her death.... calling to him "Dane! Dane!"....but he could do nothing....nothing....only see her....hear her calling him....and could do nothing....there was Bill Newland....yes, Bill saving her....though she called "Dane!"....what a horrible thing to stand there and do nothing....but, no, it was not he; it was his father standing....standing....standing by his mother's flowered coffin, his face eaten with remorse while Keith Newland triumphed over him with his quiet pitying eyes.... Still, there was that call, "Dane! Dane!"

It was Judith's voice!

Dane sat up in bed, his body pricking hotly as if pierced with innumerable tiny pins. "Oh, damn me," he muttered wearily, "I'll soon go nuts at this rate."

And then the voice came again. "Dane! Dane!"

This time, knowing himself awake, he sat up and swung his feet to the cold floor, sitting there tense and breathless. He tried to say "Who is it?" Instead, he uttered a thick and guttural "Ju—dith?"

"Yes. I—I've come," came a quick broken answer. "It's I."

"Why, I'm in bed," the words came from an utter vacancy of mind. If the stars in the serene sky had suddenly taken on frivolous legs of moonlight and come down to dance in the sage-brush, he would have been less mystified. With a mighty mental effort he again gathered words.

"I'm in bed," he repeated with heavy solemnity.

"I—I suppose you are. Get out of bed. Put on your—your bathrobe."

He tied his bathrobe about him with unsteady hands and after repeated attempts succeeded in getting his feet into their respective slippers.

"There's no one here but the servants," his groping mind fumbled conventionally.

"Oh, yes, there are. Aunt Ellen's here and Uncle Jim and your father. Aren't you please going to open the door? Aunt Ellen's counting every minute I'm here."

Dane's mind grappled helplessly with her words and succumbed again to vacuity. He somehow got to the big barred door and after several lifetimes of blinded effort, pulled the bar back and slowly swung it open to find that the small square landing outside had become indeed an area of heaven. Judith wore a long soft traveling coat that followed caressingly the lines of her tall figure, and her rumpled hair with the moonlight shining through it made a halo of loveliness about her pale tired face. He stood still looking at her.

"What are....you do..ing here?" he jerked out.

"Why, I've just *come*; don't you want me?"

"Y-es, I want you," he said slowly; he could not move.

With a little cry of tenderness, she rushed to him and put her arms up around his neck. As her beloved body pressed close against him, he sobbed out hoarsely and drew her into arms that hurt her with their welcome. His lips found tears on her cheeks, but on her answering lips was ecstasy. Madness, delightful delirious madness was surely upon him; his heart-beats were agony; his head throbbed. Judith drew a little out of his close embrace, snuggled one hand under the collar of his bathrobe and caressed his hot pulsing throat with her smooth cool palm.

"Oh, Dane, dearest,—*what* if your father hadn't come?" she whispered, as if still fearful of what might have been.

"My father....my father?" he parroted. "My *father*?"

"Wait." She slipped past him and gathered up a heavy blanket that lay over

a chair-back, shook it open, and threw it Indian fashion, over both their shoulders. "I've twisted Aunt Ellen's conventional soul on the rack these last five days, so we'll sit outside even if we freeze."

So, wrapped in a grotesque bundle, they sat down on the top step of the log stairway.

"What did you say about dad?" he asked her. His mind was still one-pathed and still led to mystery.

"The night you left he came to see us," she told him simply. "He—he—it seems he heard what I said to you that day by your mother; and—I think it doesn't matter now, all that he said," her voice broke a little, "all that matters is, that he made me understand."

"Made you understand what, Judith?" His voice had become his own again, touched with a doubt that made her quick answer very positive.

"That I have been wrong—that the only

thing in all the world for me to do, is to marry the man I love."

A sharp ejaculation burst from his lips; he dropped her hands, and straightened away from her.

"I'm afraid you *don't* understand; I lied to you once when there was no need for lying—when you didn't have any reason to doubt me. Now, you have."

"Yes," she said, very low. "It was my fault. I—I think I understand." She lifted her face to his and before the light in her brown eyes his heart was healed of all its hurt.

After a silence that was greatly good, he said, wonderingly:

"That must have been a hard, hard thing for dad to do—to go to you."

"Oh, yes," she said, and shivered in his encircling arms, "it must be terrible to feel as he does;....he was so tense, so still....Aunt Ellen *kissed* him when he left. I shan't ever forget how he looked

....I made everybody stay up half the night and pack. We left on the morning train."

Dane said nothing; he knew the things his father must have said, though Judith never told him, and he knew with white-hot gratitude the pain of pride his father had borne for him.

"How terribly, terribly still it is," whispered Judith.

"Yes; you can hear things worth while out here; I can hear the beating of your heart," he said. "I—I wish you liked the West."

She looked out ahead, and there were only hills...hills...hills climbing higher and higher into purple misted mountains. Hills and stars and moonlight.

"I'll learn my husband's love for it," she answered to the wistfulness in his voice. "New York is lonelier than this—without you."

The door at the foot of the stairs opened

and a warning "hoo-hoo," emerged cautiously in advance of Mrs. Lawson's tall, straight-shouldered figure. Dane started from his blanket cocoon, but was held back by an undisturbed Judith. "Silly, don't you suppose she'll see us loving each other all the rest of our lives..... Here we are, Aunt Ellen; has it been fifteen minutes?"

"It has. Good morning, Dane; why, I'm quite well, thank you, considering the fact that I haven't had any sleep for five nights and have been in a train wreck besides," the accusing brusqueness of her voice was offset by a strange huskiness. "But I'll be grateful if you can convince that modern cave woman that she's permanently run you to earth, and induce her to leave you a few hours. If I don't get you two married by to-morrow—"

Here she was silenced by assurances of their hearty cooperation, but she persevered, almost plaintively:

“Judith, do come on, dear. Don’t be so inhuman. If those are Dane’s bare ankles that I think I see, he’ll have pneumonia by morning.”

“All right, Aunt Ellen, I’ll come this minute. You—you don’t need to wait.”

So Aunt Ellen obediently left them to the sweetness of their last minute.

“Judith,” Dane said huskily, like one humbled before the supremacy of an impartial law, “there’s no putting aside a real love, is there?”

And Judith, wholly modern but wholly woman, burnt her theories on the same altar.

After she had gone he stood a while, wrapped like an Indian in his blanket, looking out over the hills; and the last words his mother’s voice had touched, seemed to be part of the silence.

“I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help.”

Standing there, a surpassing quietude

fell upon him, as if he were healed of fear by gentle trusted hands, and strengthened by the surety that death is only the beginning of a greater love.

When he went inside, he turned his mother's picture toward his bed, so that the moonlight shone full upon it.

"Little old mother," he muttered once, before he went to sleep.

THE END



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